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SIX-GUN

SADDLE-SLEUTHS

A Thrilling Book-Length
Novel By **JAMES
SCHAFFER**



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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER, 1942



COMPLETE \$2.00 NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

SIX-GUN SADDLE-SLEUTHS James Schaffer 10

Into Lost Valley rode Lazy Ladigan, looking for all the world like a peaceful, easy-going drifter. But when both nesters and ranchmen tried to stop him, they found they had one hell of a fighter on their hands — for Ladigan was out to see to it that his pard, Bull Jackson, wasn't held in that Lost Valley jail a day longer, murder-charge or no murder-charge!

A RIP-ROARING NOVELET

TOP 'EM ALL Anthony Rud 96

Chot Merrill learned to rue the day that he found Keno Raht unconscious in a snowbank, in time to save the Turkey-track foreman's life. For Raht hit a new low for sheer orneryness when Chot accepted a job under him. A fast-moving action story, based upon true accounts of the famous outlaw-horse, Steamboat.



SPECIAL FEATURE

TRAIL AND SADDLE A Department 92

Fact articles of the West. Brett Austin tells of "Clark Stocking — Shotgun Guard."

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

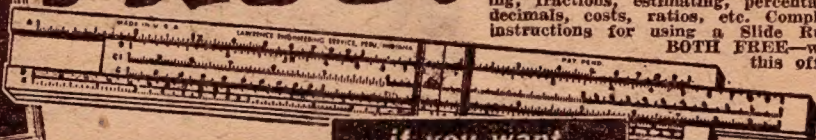
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**Profits Typical of
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**This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing**

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One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made \$10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

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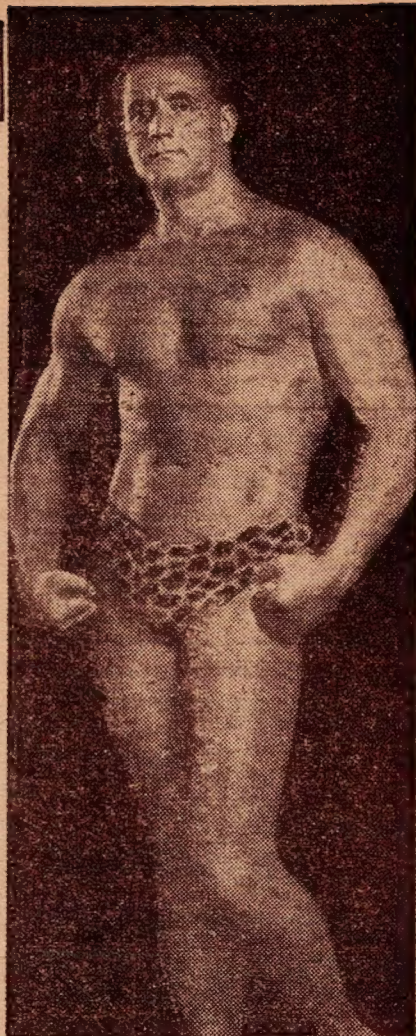
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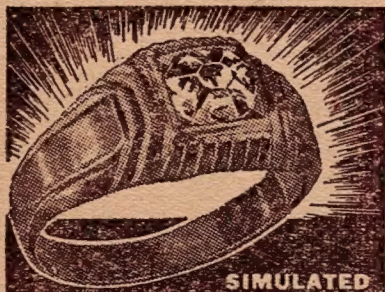
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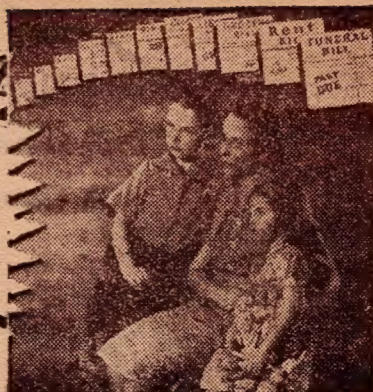
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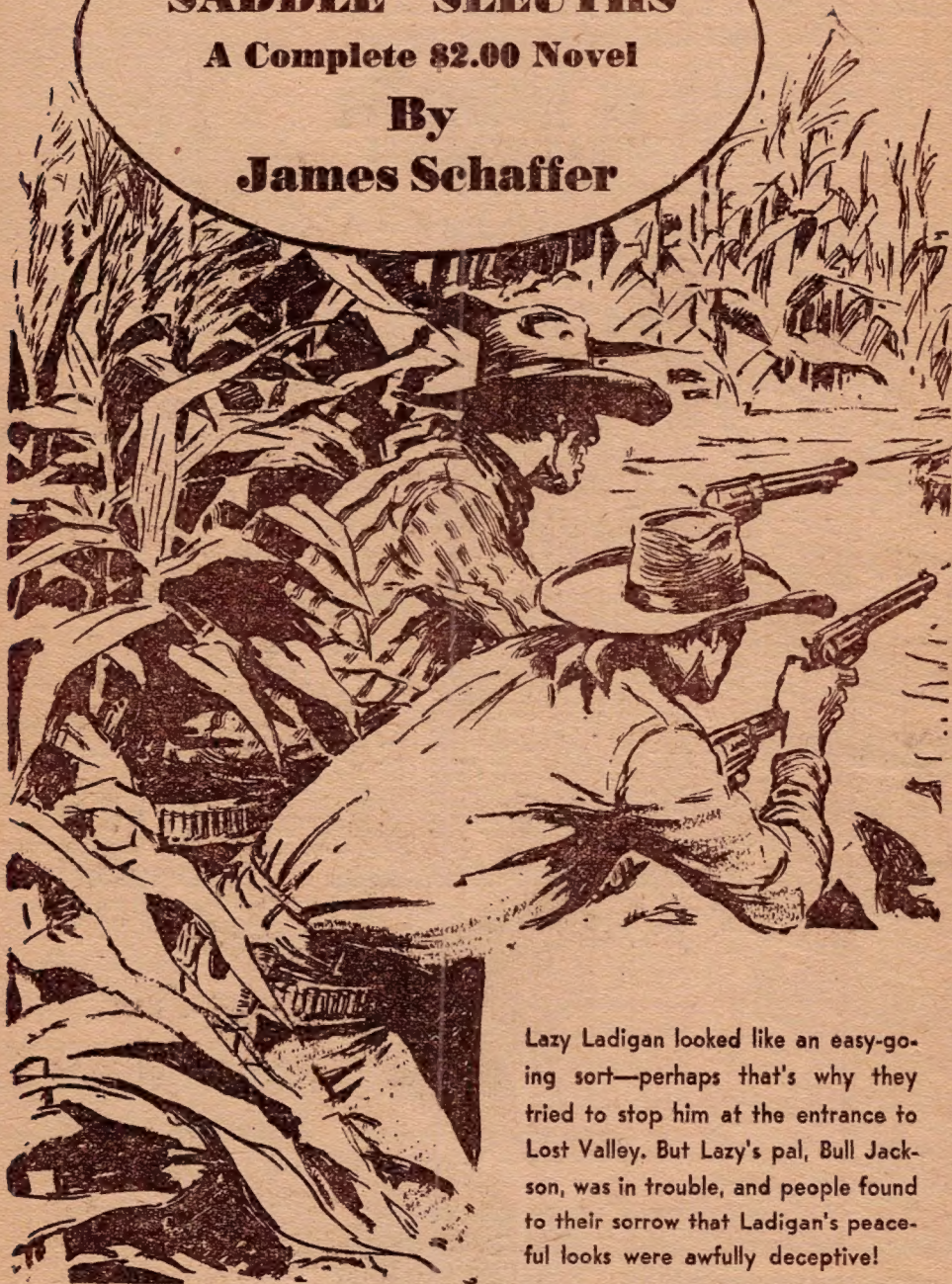
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**By
James Schaffer**



Lazy Ladigan looked like an easy-going sort—perhaps that's why they tried to stop him at the entrance to Lost Valley. But Lazy's pal, Bull Jackson, was in trouble, and people found to their sorrow that Ladigan's peaceful looks were awfully deceptive!



First Magazine Publication



CHAPTER I

"I'm Going to Town!"

LAZY LADIGAN blew one last, wild, despairing note, and the wailing of the harmonica died away in the early morning sunlight.

"Didn't like it, hugh, Sloppy?" he addressed the big hammerhead horse he rode. Sloppy flicked an ear backwards, wriggled it once, then shot it at a forward angle again.



"Didn't think so," Lazy drawled. "Cheer up. Here comes your favorite, 'The Face on the Barroom Floor.'" He lifted a long right leg and draped it across the saddle horn. His left foot he kicked free of the stirrup and let dangle, and thus sprawled in the saddle. Half-heartedly he thumped the battered mouth organ against the palm of his hand, then blew a couple of wheezy, quivering notes. Sloppy's ears did nip-ups.

"Can I help it?" Lazy growled back. "Me, I think this harmonicky is totally out of tune." He was thoughtful for a minute. "Betcha that .45 slug dent ruined its music-making qualities. O-o-h-h, well." Once more he placed it to his lips and the mournful dirge squeaked past his cupped fingers.

Sloppy flicked his ears once more, rattled his bridle energetically, and continued to plod onward.

They were nearing the skyline. Since day-break the big hammerhead had been climbing upward steadily, and now, only a few hundred feet ahead was the jagged crest of the mountain range. The road was wide enough for wagons, but it twisted and turned its tortuous way up the mountain toward a narrow cleft or break in the rocky spine of the top of the mountain. The Notch.

And from The Notch, so Lazy had heard, a man could see the whole broad sweep of Lost Valley lying at his feet, dotted with ranchhouses, and with small black dots, that were cattle, crawling over its surface.

Sloppy snorted at the steepness of the last few hundred feet, but he did not stop to blow. Big, awkward looking, and as ugly as a mud rail fence after a week's rain, to use Lazy's own description, Sloppy nevertheless possessed stamina that could keep him going long after other horses were worn out.

Lazy was finishing the last caterwauling notes of "The Face on the Barroom Floor" when the rifle cracked.

He saw its flash from behind a boulder in The Notch, heard its vicious whine, and felt his worn Stetson leave his head. And yet, there was no outward reaction, other than the harmonica hit a note a little more sour than the rest, and Sloppy stopped.

"No use going for my own gun," Lazy told Sloppy, "that fellow wasn't out to lay me low—he coulda drilled me as easy as he drilled my hat—at that range with a Winchester."

Indolently, he started to slide to the ground after his punctured headpiece.

"Stay like you are," the unseen marksman yelled. "H'ist both hands and move in closer."

"But my hat—" Lazy started to protest. The rifle slashed again, the slug singing inches past Lazy's cheek. He forgot the hat, clucked, and Sloppy minced forward with little short steps, ears erect.

"There are four other rifles looking at you from these rocks," the boulder-hid man said, "so don't try nothing funny. Our sense of humor is all warped and rusty. Want to talk to you."

Lazy lifted his right leg back over the saddle horn, sprawling again, and fished in his shirt pocket for the makings. "Neat way you got of starting a conversation," he drawled, "but I don't like it."

"That's why we do it that way," the other snapped, and stepped into view, eyeing Lazy with a hard, suspicious glance.

Through sleepy-looking, half-drooping eyelids, Lazy eyed him back. He saw a stocky man dressed in conventional range garb, blue shirt, well-worn, red bandana that could stand washing, leg-fitting leather chaps, high-heeled boots and spurs. The man held his rifle in one hand, dangling at his side. His six-gun holster was slipped over the belt that held his pants up.

"And that means," Lazy was saying to himself, "that he's no gunman, else he'd be holding that rifle in the crook of his arm for a quick shot, and that forty-five would be belted low—so's he wouldn't have to break his elbow reaching so high for it."

The other man had finished his inspection of Lazy. He pointed to Lazy's gun, belted low and tied down, and raised his voice to speak to his unseen companions in the rocks.

"Look at that gun, men. A gun-toughy if I ever saw one. It's just like we figured—old Henry Eldridge went to Silverstone to hire gunmen!" His eyes snapped at Lazy.

"If that's a horse you're riding—which it don't look like—then turn it around an' git! Eldridge's got another think coming if he figures he can fill Lost Valley with hired killers!"

"On second thought," Lazy's drawl was dry and sarcastic, "I believe that rifle of yours speaks more melodious than you do. I never heard of this jasper, Eldridge, but I got business in Lost Valley and I'm goin'—"

A Winchester's bark cut his words short. The rifle spoke from behind a nearby boulder. The end of his cigarette exploded in a

shower of tobacco and flying sparks. In the dead silence that followed, the clinkety-click of the hidden gunman as he levered out the empty was loud and crackling.

Lazy turned his head slowly till he faced the rock hiding the marksman.

"A fellow in Dodge City tried that once," he drawled. "Only it was a four-bit cigar I was smoking then. That four-bit cigar cost him twenty-five dollars. Only he didn't mind, 'cause it was his last twenty-five dollars—and they used it to bury him with."

THE laugh that floated over the rock had a nasty ring in it. "Take your booger tales elsewhere, gunslick. You got your orders, and this time they ain't coming from Henry Eldridge or Grant Tabor, nor even Quirt Magurn. Backtrack, gunslick!"

Lazy was building another smoke. He held the match up, and looked inquiringly at the boulder. "Want to strike it for me?"

When no shot came from the rock, he flicked it with a thumb nail and sucked deeply on the brown paper cigarette.

"So now it's three gents I'm taking orders from: a Henry Eldridge, a Grant Tabor and a Quirt Magurn." He blew smoke into the morning sunlight. "It's true that my gun's low and that it's tied down. But it ain't for hire, and I still got business in Lost Valley, and I'm still going."

With a lightning move he jerked the cigarette from his lips, and eyed the boulder with a slow grin.

"Aw, hell, Ab," another voice spoke with disgust, "if he's stubborn, I say pump some lead into him and get it over with."

Ab was evidently the man standing by Lazy's horse. He jerked his head toward the new voice, and squinted at Lazy. "Hear that?"

Lazy nodded and spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm still looking for a chance to explain—"

Ab took a step closer. "Talk ain't going to do you no good, gunslick! Get that straight! Now, if you got the energy, straighten that back of yours and git moving!"

Lazy, with one leg hooked over the saddle horn, was indeed bent far over—it looked almost as if his big nose were rubbing his boot toe. As Ab finished talking, Lazy sighed morosely.

One brown hand whipped toward his boot—so fast that it was a blur in the crisp

sunlight. His other arm whipped out like a big hook, settling around Ab's neck and jerking him closer.

A startled curse from the rocks died away to a gurgle, as they saw Lazy's other hand.

Ab had been pulled close to Sloppy, and he now stared into the black muzzle of a shiny little Derringer.

"Now, Ab," Lazy's tone was fatherly, but tinged with dryness, "tell your friends to come out into sight, bring their firearms with them."

Ab was staring cross-eyed into the Derringer's muzzle. He gurgled something, but to the men in the rocks, it evidently made sense. Four men, carrying rifles, rose from their hiding places and shuffled forward, wary for a chance to shoot Lazy before he could drop the hammer that would send a slug through Ab's head.

Lazy hugged Ab closer to Sloppy, slipped the Derringer's muzzle behind the man's ear.

"Put all your guns on the ground in a pile." The laziness was suddenly gone from his voice. Quickly, he slipped out of the saddle, and still holding Ab close, and keeping an eye on Ab's companions, scouted around. He found what he wanted less than fifty feet away.

"Five horses," he mused into Ab's ear. "So I reckon there's no more of your kind acting bashful and still hiding in the rocks." Back in his boot went the Derringer, to be replaced by the big Colt.

"No, Ab, you slip all the bridles off and whup them horses down the trail—away from Lost Valley. "You—" he indicated another, "get my hat. Then everybody but one of you will remove his boots—it'll take one man some time to round up five horses. The boots and the guns I will leave down the trail about a mile. I'm going on to Town—like I said—I got business there."

Lost Valley boasted one settlement, a small gathering of false-fronted buildings squatting at the base of the high mountains that ringed the Valley. The settlement was simply called Town. There had been efforts to give it a more imposing name, but the natives of the valley blandly continued to call it Town, and thus it remained.

Lazy pushed Sloppy into a fast walk down the winding trail which led into the Valley toward Town. A sufficient distance down the trail, he dropped his collection of boots, rifles and six-guns.

Further down the mountain the trail

branched. The one leading to the right would take a traveler to Town, the other one led straight out into the valley. Lazy kneed Sloppy into the Town trail, and called for more speed.

A few minutes later he threw a glance back toward The Notch and whistled in surprise.

"That jasper's horse musta been trained to come when he whistled," he drawled in Sloppy's ear. "Didn't take him long to catch him, and from the way he's coming off that mountain it ain't goin' take him long to get where he's going. I wonder will he try—"

He pulled Sloppy to a halt, pulled his own brush-scarred Winchester from the boot and waited. The oncoming rider reached the spot where Lazy had left the guns, stopped long enough to arm himself, then galloped on down the trail.

Lazy raised his rifle as the man neared the branch in the trail, but the man took the other trail and did not follow the young rider.

"See that, Sloppy?" he said. "Riding hell-for-leather to spread the news that a gun-slick stranger's in town in the pay of Henry Eldridge. And me on a peaceful mission—just a peaceful errand to bust one Bull Jackson in the nose for the wrongs he's done me."

Once more Sloppy moved forward, but this time it was with those slow, mincing steps, neck arched and ears pointed ahead like twin spears. Lazy read the sign and prepared for it.

"More trouble, Sloppy? Danged if I ain't beginning to wonder whether it's worth all this trouble—even to bust Bull Jackson in the nose."

His eyes scanned the twisting trail ahead, but whoever might be lying in wait, had pulled off the trail into the thick brush and was well hidden.

AND for that reason Lazy slipped the Derringer out of his boot and tucked it in his shirt pocket, the same pocket from which dangled the little cardboard tab and string of his tobacco sack. And after making that simple preparation, he appeared to drowse again.

This time there was no warning shot. Just a voice that was cold and altogether very unpleasant. It came from behind.

"Pull up, stranger, and leave that gun alone."

Lazy obeyed, and went through his ritual of draping his leg over the saddle horn, while three men rode out of the brush behind him. Silently, the three ringed him. No rifles this time, he noticed, but six-guns, and it took but a glance to know that these men knew how to use them.

Hard-eyed, tight-lipped and wary, they held their Colts in a manner that showed they used them well, and often. One was evidently a half-breed Mex. He was gaudily dressed and rode a silver-mounted saddle. The second was big and looked dull-witted—but he had a very efficient-looking gun arm.

The third caught Lazy's attention and held it. Small, wiry, with uneven yellow teeth, he had a green patch over one eye, and his lips were puffed. He was evidently the leader, for he now moved forward and lifted Lazy's gun.

Lazy chuckled dryly. "If you're interested, this is the second time today I been stopped. First time was on top of the mountain."

"Yeah?" It was Snaggly-Tooth who spoke, and his question was quick and nervous.

High-strung, this killer, Lazy told himself. He'd kill before he thought, and kill again to get out of the jam. He'd have to be careful with that Derringer.

"Who by?" Snaggly-Tooth demanded.

Lazy shrugged. "We was introduced by a Winchester, and it spoke so loud I didn't catch the gent's name. Think the name his mammy gave him was Ab, though."

A quick, meaningful glance shuttled between the three men.

"What business you got in Lost Valley, if any?" Snaggly-Tooth wanted to know.

"I ain't been hired by Henry Eldridge, or Grant Tabor, nor even Quirt Magurn," Lazy said positively, and Snaggly-Tooth laughed.

"I'll say you haven't," he snapped. "Why, Quirt wouldn't give you a second—" Snaggly-Tooth caught himself.

"I take it," Lazy said drily, "that you have been hired by them three."

"Never mind that," Snaggly-Tooth barked angrily. "You say a gent named Ab and his pals stopped you. How come they didn't stop you for good?"

Lazy threw a quick glance at his left boot, then jerked his eyes away guiltily. "Why—un—I talked to Ab kinda—"

But Snaggly-Tooth was leering in triumph. "Ham! Look in this jasper's left

boot." The big man moved to comply, and Snaggly-Tooth turned to Lazy.

"You ain't dealing with that bunch of two-bit cow herders and sod-busters now, bozo. We," his puny chest puffed out, "don't fall for them cheap tricks. Watcha find, Ham?"

"A knife," the big man mumbled. "I'll try the other boot. Nope, nothing there."

Snaggly-Tooth seemed to be considering. "Looks like I mighta pegged you wrong, stranger. As a matter of fact, Quirt Maguin might have a job for you—if you're interested," he added, with a glance at Lazy's low-slung gun.

"Wasn't exactly figuring on taking a job," Lazy drawled. "Was looking up an old friend of mine. Name's Bull Jackson."

Snaggly-Tooth snarled an oath deep in his throat. Ham grunted in sudden anger, and the half-breed sucked his breath in sharply.

"So you're Lazy Ladigan!" Snaggly-Tooth's lips drew back, exposing his yellow teeth. His gun was raising. "I'll blow you to—"

Lazy was caught between a cross-fire, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Like lightning, his hand streaked for his shirt pocket. Snaggly-Tooth, confident that Lazy was unarmed, was taking his time, and it was that which saved Lazy's life.

He didn't try to draw the Derringer, simply grabbed it through his shirt, twisted his body so its muzzle bore on Snaggly-Tooth's stomach and pulled the trigger.

Ham and the half-breed must have thought it was Snaggly-Tooth firing, for they wasted a precious second—a second in which Lazy snatched Snaggly-Tooth's gun from his nerveless fingers, and swung its muzzle toward them.

"I shoot even better with a full-size gun." His words were clipped and short. "Gimme your guns—and now git moving. I got business in Town, and I'm going there!"

He watched as Ham and the half-breed, supporting Snaggly Tooth between them, moved off.

And a few minutes later, he saw what he'd been expecting. Ham left Snaggly-Tooth in the half-breed's care, and put spurs to his horse, galloping fast toward the Valley.

"See that, Sloppy?" he mourned "Riding hell-for-leather to spread the news that a gunslick stranger's in town—looking for

Bull Jackson." His eyes narrowed. "Something tells me," he murmured, "that I'm going to have to peel a peck of trouble offa Bull's back, even before I can give him the well-deserved bust in the nose! C'mon, Sloppy, let's go to Town!"

CHAPTER II

A Most Unfriendly Town

SLOPPY was kicking up the dust in Town's main street, before Lazy spoke again.

"I ask you confidentially, Sloppy," he said softly, "do you feel anything? I mean sorta like—uh—well, like you was setting on a keg of gunpowder and a lit smoke-dripping sparks? Look at that jasper over by the post office. By the swing of them two guns, he ain't no Sunday School teacher, nor yet an honest rancher. And without even knowing my name is Ladigan—a handsome man—he don't like me. Tch, tch."

Sloppy flicked an ear and continued his plodding down Main Street, past the post office, a saddle shop, a feed store and a restaurant. The street was close to being deserted, but Lazy could feel the impact of hidden eyes, and the feeling was not friendly. He squirmed uncomfortably in the saddle.

"Now, there's a gent," he muttered, "that looks like he might be a small-time rancher—mebbe one of Ab's friends—looks about as comfortable wearing that six-shooter as you would, Sloppy, wearing a bustle. And he ain't cast ary a friendly glance at me. O-o-h-h, well."

He turned Sloppy toward Town's one saloon, the Silver Spangle. Half a dozen or so horses stood hipshot at the tie rail. Lazy guided Sloppy between a buckskin and a black, and loafed his way out of the saddle to the ground.

As he did so, the swing doors of the saloon flapped, and a man came out. Lazy spotted him as a hard-case gunman. The man shot a quick glance at Lazy, then his poker face hid whatever surprise he might have shown. He jerked the buckskin away from the rail, swung into the saddle and trotted out of town.

"I'd say," Lazy told himself as he flipped Sloppy's reins over the tie rail, "that that buckskin carried a Cross Bar brand, the same brand the cayuses wore that Ham, Snaggly-Tooth and the half-breed was rid-

ing. Nope, wait a minute, the half-breed's horse carried a different brand—looked like a bird's track—yeah, that's it, the Eagle Track. I've heard of it."

He moseyed into the Silver Spangle.

Whatever conversation had been going on in the saloon when he entered, was hushed. There were perhaps ten men in the saloon, counting the bartender. And as always, some of them were hard-eyed gunmen—others looked like small-time ranchers and sod-busters.

And as always, the two groups didn't mingle. Three narrow-eyed hombres lounged at the bar near the door. A larger bunch of men was grouped toward the back of the saloon, half interested in a poker game.

The three hard-cases straightened instantly. One of them quietly but suggestively shifted his whiskey glass from his right hand to his left. Another brought his drink half-finished from his lips and set his glass on the bar.

In the back of the saloon, the poker game was forgotten as they eyed the newcomer.

The bartender, a short, rotund fellow, finished polishing a glass and slid it out of sight under the bar, pointedly trying to ignore Lazy.

But the lank, slow-moving young rider wouldn't be ignored. Outwardly he showed no sign of having seen the shift of the gunman's whiskey glass, nor the stopping of the poker game.

Inside him, however, those signs had registered; had rung a bell of warning. His demeanor was guileless and composed, though. He crooked a finger at the barman, and when that didn't draw attention, he brought the flat of his hand down on the bar with a resounding whack.

"First," he said in a mock mournful voice, "I get stopped on top of the mountain by Ab and his friends"—there was an audible shuffling from the group in the back—"and told I can't go to Town. Having talked to Ab, and convinced him that I had business here, why, then, Ham and his pards"—the three toughies exchanged glances—"was reluctant to let me by."

Lazy sighed long and loud. "And now, to add insult to my injured soul, you won't serve me whiskey—ahh, that's better, bartender—no—no, you pour it—I'll hold the glass."

A man had detached himself from the poker players in the back, and was coming toward Lazy. He was big—at one time must have stood well over six feet. But hard

work—and worry—had bent his once magnificent shoulders, and there was the hint of a slow, tired drag in his step.

Still, there was no shrinking, no sign of hesitation as he neared Lazy. Big, calloused thumbs were hooked in his gunbelt, and his eyes bored steadily on Ladigan.

"What was this talk about being stopped at the top of the mountain, Stranger?" There was no challenge in his voice, simply a hard, direct question. Lazy turned his back on the three men, so as to face the big man. He hooked a boot over the bar rail, sipped his drink before replying.

"Ab and four of his friends, they 'lowed mebbe I didn't want to come to Town."

"And—"

LAZY knew that every man in the Silver Spangle was tensed for a gun fight. His back was to the three men near the front, a fact which he now deplored. The poker players had spread out slightly.

"And what?" Lazy was taking another sip of his drink, thinking the tension would slacken. It didn't. It tightened.

"You said you talked to Ab, and convinced him," the big man went on relentlessly. "What kind of language did you use, Stranger?" And the big man's steady gaze shifted to Lazy's gun.

Lazy snapped one word. "English." Then he turned back to the bar and filled his glass again. The big man stood there a moment, undecided, then turned and walked heavily back to his companions. One of the three near the door snickered. The big man whirled.

"Maybe he didn't use the same language when he met Ham and his friends, Del," the big man snapped, and Lazy felt a chill trickle down his spine.

"Never thought of that," the one addressed as Del muttered. "How about it, Stranger?" His voice took on an edge. "Same palaver with Ham and his pards as with Ab?"

Again Lazy felt that chill, but before he could reply, rapid hoofbeats rumbled in the street outside. There was the thump of a man leaving the saddle in a hurry, then clattering footsteps, and Ab hurried in.

"Howdy, Ab," Lazy drawled. Surprise flickered across Ab's face. He grunted surlily at Lazy, and went on back to the poker players. His arrival stirred up a buzz of low-pitched conversation, and glances were thrown at Lazy.

"He did?" the big man asked Ab eager-

ly, looking at Lazy. Ab nodded. The big man looked at Lazy with new interest, and started to get up. But Ab restrained him, and said some more in a low tone.

"Oh, he is, is he?" the big man grunted, and the look he bestowed on Lazy that time wasn't friendly. Lazy poured another small drink. The arrival of Ab had broken the tension a little, but the three hard gents by the door were still curious, and could still start trouble aplenty.

"I'm still asking," the gunman near the door persisted, his tone a little colder, "about Ham."

"I know the answer to that one, Del," Ab spoke from the rear. "This fellow ran into Snag Yancey, Ham Smith and Dago. He shot Snag in the belly."

Del's whiskey glass tinkled musically as it hit the floor and shattered. He and his two companions were now tensed, facing Lazy, and their hands hovered like talons near their guns. A wry smile crinkled Lazy's features. Ab had sure played that smart. He'd talked Lazy into a fight which might eliminate Lazy and at the same time might get a couple of the gunmen killed.

But while the three hesitated, more horsemen arrived in town. Two men entered the saloon and joined Ab and his group, their glances shuttling quickly toward Lazy.

"They'll be the men the messenger was sent to round up," Lazy thought. "They got here quick. Some of Del's bunch ought to be arriving soon, if Ham was as fast as Ab's bunch."

Ham had been, it appeared, for while the grim tableau held there in the Silver Spangle, another man slipped in and joined Del's bunch.

"Snag hurt bad?" Del spoke to the newcomer from the side of his mouth, never taking his eyes off Lazy.

"He'll live," the new arrival answered. "Derringer slug in his brisket. We sent for Quirt. He'll be along."

"The fireworks ought to start any minute now," Lazy was telling himself. "I can beat Del to it—he's too tight—muscles all bunched and tied in knots, he is. I'll go for him, then mebbe I can jump the bar—"

Footsteps were again thumping outside. Lazy heard the doors squeak, then a new voice broke the silence—and it carried an unmistakable ring of authority.

"Break it up—c'mon, break it up! At it again, eh, Del? Remember what I told

you, don't you? Next time you start powder burning, I'll heave you in the calaboose till you rot—"

Lazy shifted his gaze to this new arrival, and the tingling in his spine died down at the sight of a star glinting on the man's chest.

Del's lips twisted in a cold smile. "Okay, Sheriff," he muttered through stiff lips. "but this hombre plugged Snag—"

"Snag's had it coming a long time," the lawman broke in, then forgot Del as he turned to Lazy. "I'm Sheriff Ed Langstrom. Looks like you've stirred up a pile of trouble even before you got to Town. What's your name, Stranger, and what's your business in Lost Valley?"

Lazy sighed contentedly. "That's the way I like to be asked questions, Sheriff," he grinned. "Right out with it, asking exactly what you want to know—none of these veiled hints, and sly backhand remarks. Boy, it's a pleasure to be asked a—"

SHERIFF LANGSTROM looked in his middle fifties. He had cold gray eyes, graying hair, and a graying mustache. His mustache now bobbed impatiently at Lazy's indolent drawl.

"All right, all right, so you like straightforward questions," he snapped. "And I like my answers the same way. So let's have 'em."

"On account of being so energetic," Lazy told him, "the name is Lazy Ladigan—and I'm here to look up my old side-kick, Bull Jackson."

"What!" The word exploded from the sheriff's mouth. His mustache seemed to bristle. He wagged a finger under Lazy's nose for emphasis.

"Lemme tell you something, Ladigan. I won't stand for you coming to my town, stirring up trouble, and trying to pull a jail-break! I won't have it, you understand? One false move outta you, and into jail you go!"

"There you go!" Lazy snorted in disgust. "The same as the rest—with them veiled hints and backhanded remarks—"

"If you think I veiled a hint when I promised to throw you into jail if you started something—" The lawman was bristling again, when Lazy cut him short.

"All I'm after is to find my old pardner, Bull Jackson," he said. "Just tell me where I can find him for a nice long talk—"

"I'll tell you where you can find him,"

Sheriff Langstrom snapped. "But there won't be no long talks. He's in jail."

"Jail? What for?"

"Murder! And you ain't going to have no long talk with him and plan no jailbreak, Ladigan!"

CHAPTER III

Bull Tells His Story

"NOW, listen, Sheriff," Lazy was stretching his long legs to keep pace with the sheriff's rapid strides down the street, "whatever gave you the idea I'd try to bust Bull out of your calaboose?"

The lawman grunted and continued his way to his office. The crowd in the Silver Spangle had been dispersed, and Langstrom had sent the two opposing factions on their way out of town with a few well-chosen remarks on keeping the peace. After that—his jaw had set stubbornly, and his mustache had bristled, when Lazy mentioned paying a visit to Bull Jackson.

"Tain't constitutional," Lazy argued. "Constitution says—"

"It don't say nothing about a sheriff having to let a jailbreak happen right under his nose!" Langstrom growled.

"Sheriff," vast hurt was in Lazy's voice, "where, in this big, wide world did you get the idea I'd try to unpeel that jail from around Bull?"

"From Bull himself!" the lawman snapped. "Threw him in jail a week ago. Hadn't been in five minutes till he started bragging that his pard, Lazy Ladigan, would be along and bust him out, like that!" Sheriff Langstrom snapped his fingers.

"Between you and me," Lazy's tone was confidential, "I got a grudge to settle with Bull, and—"

"Humph!" was Langstrom's only comment as he turned into his office. Lazy followed. The sheriff ignored him, sat down at his desk and rummaged through some papers. Lazy slouched in a chair, his eyes wandering toward a door at the back of the office, which evidently led to the cells. Langstrom continued to ignore him for fully five minutes, while he shuffled and reshuffled the papers in front of him.

Finally, angrily, "You going to set there all day?"

Lazy nodded. "Mebbe tomorrow, too."

The lawman went back to his papers, but

now Lazy could feel his eyes on him, studying him. There was a calculating gleam in the sheriff's eyes, as if he were turning some problem over in his mind.

"I've changed my mind, Ladigan," the lawman said. "You can see Jackson. But first I'll search you."

Lazy grinned and stood up. He could only guess the reason the lawman had suddenly reversed his position. But of one thing he was sure. The sheriff was playing this game to suit himself. He hoped to gain something by letting Lazy see his friend. Probably, Lazy thought idly, the lawman hoped Lazy would try to engineer a jailbreak; which would give him an excuse to keep both him and Bull in jail.

The lawman removed the young rider's Colt, took a big pocket knife from his pants pocket, and found the Derringer in the boot. He eyed the little hide-out a minute, then looked hard at Lazy, but said nothing. Finally he found the harmonica.

"Do you play this thing? I sorta like music."

"Do I play it!" Lazy said eagerly. "Gimme." Maybe this would be a chance to soften the lawman a little.

He beat it against his palm, cupped it to his mouth and started blowing. The look of happy anticipation on the sheriff's face gave way to one of blank astonishment, and gradually his nose twisted as if he'd smelled something unpleasant.

"All right, all right," he cut in, "you can go in and see Bull now."

"Wait'll I finish," Lazy grunted between notes.

"You did that before you started!" Langstrom growled with brutal frankness. "Gimme that danged thing! Bull's right through that door. He's got the bridal suite."

Lazy stepped through the door into the dimness of a corridor, lined on either side with grated cell doors.

"Hi, Bull! Surprised to see me?"

Bull Jackson had been squatting on the side of the little iron bunk. Now he rose to his full height, six feet four and a half inches. As Langstrom had said, Bull occupied the biggest cell in the jail, but still he dwarfed it. He looked almost as broad as he was tall, and his huge head, and long, muscle-bulging arms were in proportion to the rest of his gigantic frame. A week's stubble of jet-black beard covered his big, bony face. He moved with the lumbering

slowness of a giant grizzly, grinning at his partner through the bars.

"Surprised?" the word rumbled sarcastically from the depths of his barrel-like chest. "First the sheriff runs outta his office saying he's got to stop a fight—then after a few minutes I hear that harmonica of yours—sounds like a maltese cat with fish bones in her belly, I swear. And you wanta know if I'm surprised! Who else could it have been, you danged horn toad! Boy, am I glad to see you!"

LAZY leaned against the bars of Bull's cell door. "You needn't be," he drawled. "I got your letter saying you was in a jam and needed help. But I'd of found you anyhow. I owe you a bust in the nose, you sidewinder! Actually swearing perjury against a pal to make him go to jail!"

"Aw, what's ten days in the cooler?" Bull grunted.

"Nothing," Lazy countered, "when somebody else has to serve them. That was a lowdown trick, Bull, starting that fight in Silver City, then throwing the blame on me, so's I'd get ten days in jail, and I ain't forgetting it, either, Mister Francis Periwinkle Jackson!"

Bull's great hands wrapped themselves around the bars and gripped hard. His stubble-covered jaw shot out at an angry angle.

"Lissen, you misguided sinner! I've warned you about using my real name! If you let people in this town know my real name is Francis Periwinkle"—Bull choked on the words—"I'll—I'll—"

"Forget it," Lazy chuckled. "And tell me what brought you to this sorry state of affairs, wasting your useless life behind cold prison bars. They tell me you're charged with murder. Did you kill a man?"

"I don't know whether I did or not," Bull answered sadly.

"Drunk, huh?"

"No!" Bull snapped hotly. "It happened out on the range. I was shooting for his gun arm—to cripple him. Blasted him twice. Well, when I looked at him, he had a slug in his arm—right where I was aiming—and another slug in his chest—right where I wasn't aiming!"

"Listen," Lazy said earnestly, "the way I been treated since arriving here, you'd think I was a skunk's daddy and a polecat's uncle. What's it all about? How come things are

like they are 'round here? Start at the beginning, and let's hear the whole thing."

Bull was twisting a smoke. He lit it. "The night before I—uh—you got in jail in Silver City, I read a notice in the paper, where a gent named Henry Eldridge, owner of the Eagle Track outfit here in Lost Valley, was offering five thousand cash money for the killer of John Hawkins, who owned the Cross Bar H before somebody cut him low. The money has been put in a bank, and the offer legally made."

Lazy lifted an eyebrow quizzically. "So you framed me into jail in Silver City, so's you could come over here by your lonesome and snag that five thousand yourself. Bull, you're due two busts in the—"

"Now, Lazy, we're old pals, and we oughta let bygones be bygones," Bull said sheepishly.

Lazy grunted skeptically, and Bull went on.

"Here's the lay. Henry Eldridge and John Hawkins was, at one time, the biggest ranchers in this valley. Coupla years ago there was a drought, and these two loaned money to the little fellows around here—the two-bit spreads, and a few sod-busters. About the time the notes fell due, a sod-buster found that a creek, way up in the mountains, had been dynamited. If that creek hadn't been dynamited, and its course changed, there wouldn't have been no dry spell in the Valley at all."

"So the small ranchers and farmers figured the whole play was a squeeze Eldridge and Hawkins was pulling."

"Even more so," Bull said, "when Eldridge and Hawkins wouldn't extend time on the notes, and started foreclosing on some of the smaller spreads. Naturally, there was some harsh words spoke."

"And right after that," Lazy said dreamily, "somebody started rustling stock from Eldridge and Hawkins, so the Eagle Track and the Cross Bar H imported a lot of hard-case gunnies to stop it. And then Hawkins found out something, and somebody put lead in him to shut him up."

"Yeah, and that's where I come in," Bull said. "I started nosing around, and the little ranchers didn't like it at all. They figured one of their own bunch had plugged Hawkins. The sheriff was stumped, and they didn't want nobody nosing around that might find the killer."

"That still don't put you in jail for mur-

der," Lazy urged, "and it still don't explain why the Eagle Track and the Cross Bar H crews act mean toward me'n you."

"I'm coming to that," Bull went on. "It was an Eagle Track man, one of Eldridge's boys, that I'm supposed to've killed."

"You get less sensible as you go along."

"It's like this," Bull said. "I found some evidence. Well one night I was camping out, and this Eagle Track hairpin, Joe Branch, rides up and says how about spending the night together. I says all right, and Joe asks how I've been getting along hunting the killer. I told him about the evidence I'd found, and it made him blazing mad."

"Sounds like interesting evidence," Lazy murmured.

"It is," Bull agreed. "Well, when Joe jumps up and goes for his cutter, I figured to wing him, wait till he'd calmed down and talk it over. So I pointed my weapon at his gun arm and cut loose—twicet."

"And Joe fell dead?"

"He did that. As dead as my Uncle Benny who was hung twice for stealing two horses. Knowing my gunsights weren't that far off, I examined him. He had one slug in his arm—where I'd aimed at. But I know the bullet in his chest wasn't mine—I musta missed my other shot 'cause his arm was moving fast in a draw. I figured the shot came from the brush behind him, but I searched and couldn't find any sign, and I don't remember hearing another gun—but then, Joe was shooting and I was shooting and another man coulda popped a cap and I wouldn't 've heard it."

"ANYHOW," Bull sighed, "some of Quirt Magurn's men was riding near and hear the shooting. They corralled me and took for granted I'd plugged Joe—and here I am."

"Who's this Quirt Magurn I keep hearing about?" Lazy asked.

"He's the foreman of the dead Hawkins' Cross Bar H spread. Seems like they ain't been able to find Hawkins' will, and Magurn is running the place till they figure out who falls heir to it. Watch Magurn, Lazy. He's tough meat to chew!"

"One more thing, Bull," Lazy said. "About this evidence you found. It must be good, if Joe Branch would start gun talk just on hearing it. What is it?"

"Oh, no you don't!" Bull snarled. "Think I'd tell you so's you could follow it up and

cop that five thousand? Think I'm crazy?"

"Thought you wanted out of jail?"

"Why, I wouldn't a believed it in ten thousand years!" Bull's voice was shocked. "My old pal, my pardner, blackmailing me to git the evidence, before he'll peel this two-bit jail offa my back!"

"I'm asking you again, Mister Francis Periwinkle Jackson, do you want out in the free sunshine again?"

"Don't call me that! All right, Lazy, tell you what we'll do. If I can prove this evidence I got, it'll automatically git me out of jail. I'll tell it to you, you make sure you can prove it in court, and we'll split the five thousand. What say?"

"You mean, that when the evidence you found gets generally known, it'll automatically lift the murder charge from you? Boy that evidence must be dynamite!"

"It is," Bull said simply. "All you got to do is prove it, and you've got your killer right there!"

"Okay. Let's hear it."

"Yeah," Sheriff Langstrom cut in from the doorway, "I'd like to hear that evidence, too, Jackson."

CHAPTER IV

"Watch His Quirt!"

LAZY and Bull whirled at the sound of the lawman's voice.

The sheriff came on back to the cell, poked a finger under the bars and wagged it under Bull's nose.

"If you got any evidence on Hawkins' killing, you better cough it up, or it'll go hard with you, Jackson."

"Like to know how much harder it can go than it already is," Bull snapped back.

"You'll find out, you'll find out," Langstrom growled. "It's illegal to keep that kind of evidence from the law. Besides, it don't make sense. You say when that evidence is proven, it'll automatically clear you. Then why not spill it now and get out of jail?"

"Because if I told you what I'd found out, you'd laugh in my face and tell it around town as a joke. The news would get out, and the guilty party would have time to cover up. Oh, no, Mister Tin Badge. I'm putting a bug in nobody's ear but Lazy's. And even if Lazy does find that my evidence is eighteen carat, he'll not spring it till Eldridge gets back to town."

"What's Eldridge got to do with it?" Langstrom asked, eyes narrowing quickly.

"He's the guy that put up the money, ain't he?" Bull parried.

"That shouldn't stop you," Langstrom argued. "Eldridge put the money in the bank, and signed papers that it was to be turned over to the party that found Hawkins' killer. The reward's plumb out of his hands now."

"Where is this Eldridge fellow?" Lazy stuck in.

"He's at Hondro, the county seat," Bull said. "Ought to be back three-four days from now. It's up to you, Lazy, to check up on that evidence before he gets back, then spill it the minute he hits town. We'll bust this dam' valley wide open!"

"You'll not get a chance to tell it," Langstrom growled. "Ladigan! Get out of here!"

"Why, you two-bit excuse for a badge totter!" Bull Jackson roared. "When I get out of here I'll twist that neck of yours till it looks like a corkscrew!"

"Calm down, Jack—What was that?" the lawman cocked his head to one side to listen, but it was hardly necessary, for the sound of a dozen or more horsemen galloping into town was very clear.

Bull stepped to his narrow, barred window, took a look, then whirled back to face Lazy. The giant's face was sober.

"Quirt Magurn, Grant Tabor and their whole army of Colt slingers," he told Lazy. "Coming in to make war talk about you putting a slug in Snag's belly. Sheriff, you know danged well Quirt's in Town to jump Lazy. You gotta let me out to side him—"

But Sheriff Langstrom had grabbed Lazy by the arm and was propelling him along the corridor toward the office. Bull shouted a last bit of advice before the door closed.

"Watch out for his quirt, Lazy, watch out for his quirt—"

From the window in the law office, Langstrom and Lazy watched the group of heavily armed men pull to a halt at the Silver Spangle and dismount. No sooner were they on the ground, than the large bulk of the men spread out around the door of the saloon, hands near their guns, watching up and down the street. A man, almost hidden by the rest of the crowd, hurried into the Silver Spangle.

"Lordy!" Lazy drawled. "Is all that for me?"

"It is," Langstrom said grimly. "Bull Jackson's been bragging that you'd be in Town soon to bust him outta jail—and the Eagle Track and the Cross Bar H are making danged sure he's going to hang." He turned angrily to Lazy. "You and that big walrus of a sidekick of yours have caused more trouble in this neck of the woods than a swarm of hornets!"

"Oh, I dunno," Lazy grinned.

"First," Langstrom continued grimly. "Jackson hits the Valley and starts nosing around, poking into everybody's business asking questions. He smacked Snag Yancey silly when Snag refused to tell him something he wanted to know."

"Hmmm," Lazy was remembering, "that's why Snag wasn't overly cordial to a friend of Bull's."

"And now he's in jail," the sheriff went on, "with both sides half ready to lynch him—the small ranchers because they're scared he'll pin the crime on one of them—and the big ranchers because he shot an Eagle Track rider. And you—you ain't been in the Valley five minutes till you've shot Quirt Magurn's right-hand man!"

"Looks to me like you could clear up all this trouble if you'd let Bull tell me that evidence and let me follow it up," Lazy grunted.

"I will not!" the lawman snapped promptly. "If Bull Jackson has any evidence, he'll tell it to the law—or nobody."

LAZY made no reply. The sheriff was still watching the group up the street. Lazy lifted his gunbelt from the sheriff's desk and strapped it on.

"Here he comes," Langstrom said. The man had left the Silver Spangle, and was hurrying toward the office. The crowd of gunmen followed more slowly. Lazy moved to the window beside the lawman, and studied him.

He was about as big as Snag Yancey, and was dressed like an ordinary cow hand. He wore a single, wooden-handled Colt on his left side, for a left-handed draw. He carried a quirt in his right hand. There was a hint of an arrogant strut in his walk, like a wolf stalking his prey but with a whole pack at his back.

As he neared the office, Langstrom moved from the window to the door. He opened it and stood there. Lazy moved away from the window.

"Hello, Quirt." Langstrom's voice was brittle.

"I take it, with you blocking the door that way, I ain't invited inside." The voice was flat, cold and raspy. Lazy could imagine it coming out of the thin, cruel lips of Quirt Magurn.

"That's right," Langstrom said coldly. "Don't know of any business you got in my office, so reckon there ain't no use of you being in it."

"I'll show you what business I got in there," Magurn's voice cut in with its deadly monotone. "There's a jasper in there named Ladigan. He put a Derringer slug in Snag. The Cross Bar H takes care of its own—so we're putting a slug in this Ladigan."

The sheriff's reply was low and grim. Back in the office, Lazy grinned crookedly. One long arm retrieved his Derringer and pocket knife from the sheriff's desk, where his harmonica still lay. He made sure the little gun was loaded, then swiftly and silently stepped to the door leading to Bull's cell. Noiselessly, he turned the knob, cracked the door a few inches.

"Catch!" The little gun sailed through the air. Bull's hamlike fist moved through the air, the fingers closed.

Lazy slipped the door shut, and in two strides, his long legs carried him to the other door. He shouldered up beside the sheriff.

"Understand somebody's paging me?" His eyes bored straight into Quirt Magurn's. They were green eyes, narrow-lidded and expressionless. But they jerked open slightly at Lazy's sudden appearance. There was a long scar across Magurn's face; starting at his left eyebrow and working its way jaggedly down his cheek to taper away at his thin, narrow lips.

"Yeah." The thin lips scarcely moved. "Yeah, Ladigan, somebody was paging you."

Lazy was conscious that the gunmen had moved up, and were now spread out thirty or forty feet behind Magurn.

"I won't have killing done right in my office, Magurn!" Langstrom growled, and drew his gun. Lazy found time to admire the lawman. He'd been wondering why the sheriff wanted Bull's evidence kept a secret; wondering just how the lawman fitted into this puzzle. But whatever his other faults, the sheriff of Town was no coward.

Magurn laughed, and the sound was like two sandstones being rubbed together.

"Okay, Sheriff," Quirt leered. "You name the place you'd like Ladigan killed, and we'll oblige."

"Never mind, Sheriff," Lazy was still drawling, but the words were sharp. His tall body seemed loose and easy, but his muscles were keyed and ready for the supreme test. "I'll step out of your office so's it won't git all stunk up with gunsmoke."

"Hey, Lazy, what's going on out there?" Bull's heavy voice boomed through the door.

"Li'l shindig," Lazy yelled back without turning his head. "Fellow named Magurn—wants to serve me the same kind of lead I served Snag Yancey."

"Watch his quirt!" Bull yelled. "Watch that quirt when he goes for his gun!"

Magurn heard the warning, grinned coldly. Lazy chuckled slightly as he took a good look at the quirt fastened around Magurn's right wrist. He had two or three folds of the whip caught in his hand. Lazy guessed the quirt was a good twenty-five feet long.

"Yeah," he said, half to himself, then louder: "Yeah, Quirt, I'll keep my eye on that toy. And when you go for your gun, you'll snake that whip out and wrap it around my wrist—to slow my draw till you pump me full of lead."

Magurn cackled again.

"Only," Lazy went on, and he was playing with something in his left hand, "when you start fooling with that quirt, I'll heave this knife right through your arm. That'll keep that quirt by your side where it belongs, while we bang away at each other!"

The scar in Magurn's face turned a shade whiter. The rest of the gunmen were too far away to hear Lazy's low tone.

"Want some, Quirt?" Lazy asked. "It'll just be me and you. It'll be all over before your Colt crew back yonder behind you can get going."

"You win, Sheriff," Magurn's voice was almost husky. "I won't kill this jasper in your office. But get this, Ladigan, you ain't getting your pal out of jail—and before you get out of this Valley, I'll settle with you for that slug in Snag!"

"Yellow, huh?" Lazy's words snapped out like a striking rattler's head. Quirt Magurn stiffened; his face went dead white, then livid red. The jagged scar on his face seemed to quiver.

"I'll remember that, too, when the sign's right, Ladigan!"

He spun on his heel and walked off. The gun guard was visibly surprised at this abrupt turn. They shuffled their feet, stared hard at Lazy, then at Quirt Magurn's retreating back, then followed their chief down the street.

"I never thought I'd live to see it," Langstrom breathed, "Quirt Magurn take back-talk—and swallow it—and swallow it!"

Lazy poured brown tobacco flakes in a brown paper. "He ain't no gun fighter—no man is, that relies on tricks to make up for speed. And the minute you get hep to their trick and think up one just as good—well, the stiffness just oozes out of their backbone."

"Yeah," Langstrom warned, "but if you think this is finished, you're crazy. Magurn'll get you if it takes the rest of his life."

"I'll be expecting it," Lazy said drily.

The sheriff was still incredulous. "The way Quirt backed down from a fight with you sure won't do his rep any good. That knife trick sure stopped him!"

"It woulda been better," Lazy grinned, "if I knew the first thing about throwing a knife—which I don't!"

CHAPTER V

"They're Gonna Lynch Bull!"

"WELL, I'll be hanged!" the lawman exploded, then shook his head. "Boy, you ain't got long to live. Not long to live around here. You might pull a bluff like that once, maybe even twice, but you can't keep on getting away with it."

"That's what everybody keeps telling me," Lazy said a little too solemnly. "And now, I'd like to finish my little talk with Bull. I'll go right in."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Langstrom snorted and grabbed Lazy's arm. "You stay out of there. You ain't talking no more with that partner of yours."

"There's a law that says I can," Lazy argued. Was the lawman actually afraid that he and Bull would plan a jailbreak? Or was there something else behind his refusal for the two partners to get together?

"And there's a law that says a man ought to give evidence to the law, too," Langstrom growled. "No, sir, till Jackson wants

to reason and tell what he knows, he don't get to see any more visitors. That's final!"

Lazy sighed and rolled a smoke, and while thus trying to think of a good argument for seeing Bull again, the street door opened. The man who entered was short and thick-set.

A very narrow brow, eyes too close together, and droopy, lazy lips gave him the appearance of a perpetual scowl. There was a deputy sheriff's badge on his vest. He stood in the doorway a long moment, bullet-like head thrust forward, staring at Lazy with unfriendly eyes.

"Where'n heck have you been?" Langstrom asked peevishly. "Trust you to be clean out of sight when there's a hint of trouble." He grumbled on. "Quirt and his bunch was in Town honing to hang this jasper's hide—"

"Yeah," the deputy's loose lips wobbled flabbily as he spoke, "I heard all about it. Ain't fair for you to beef about me not being around. Heard Ab Nason and a bunch were up at The Notch, and up to no good, so I rode up thataway. Before I got there I heard about this bozo and struck out for town. Is this Lazy Ladigan that Jackson kept crowing about?"

"Yeah, that's him," Langstrom grunted. "This is Tink Doss, Ladigan, my deputy."

"Howdy," Lazy said simply, but he did not get up, merely nodded.

The deputy only grunted, stared long at Lazy, then glanced at Langstrom. "Jackson's still in jail, ain't he?"

"Damn right!" Langstrom said shortly.

Doss' loose lips parted to let out a sarcastic chuckle. "Looks like your lightning don't strike as loud as your thunder roars, Ladigan," he sneered.

"Don't kid yourself," Langstrom broke in. "Listen here, Tink, just because this clothes-wearing beanpole looks lazy, don't underestimate him. He's done started plenty of trouble already, you hear? Plenty! I want you to watch him like a hawk, just to see that he don't start nothing more."

"It'll be a pleasure," the deputy grunted dourly.

"Trouble!" Langstrom rumbled on. "That's just what Ladigan seems to start. Why, Tink, he's already shot Snag in the belly, and made Quirt Magurn crawfish from a gunfight!"

"Wha-a-at?" The deputy's jaw sagged at that announcement. Langstrom went on to

explain, and from his tone, he took great relish in describing the way Quirt Magurn had showed the white feather when Lazy had called his bluff. Lazy kept watching Doss' face, and when Langstrom reached the part about Lazy throwing the knife, he flipped his smoke away.

"Again I'm asking you, Sheriff," he cut in, "can I see Bull again?"

Langstrom banged his fist on the desk. "No, dammit, no! I told you before, when Jackson feels like telling me what he knows, you can see 'im—as long as he keeps shut, you ain't goin' to talk to him."

"Whatdya mean," Doss asked quickly, "when Jackson tells what he knows? What does he know?"

"How do I know, dammit!" Langstrom almost yelled. "I overheard him tell Ladigan that he'd found some evidence that would lead to Hawkins' killer. Said—"

"What evidence? What'd he find out?" Doss cut in swiftly.

"He won't tell. He won't say a word," Langstrom snapped. "Jackson wants to tell Ladigan here, but I'm not going to let him do it. I'm the person he's going to tell, or nobody at all."

Doss grinned loosely. "That's the way to handle it, boss! It griped me to think of these two hombres moving in on our bailiwick, poking their noses in our business!"

"Oh, we do that often," Lazy grinned at the deputy. "When a job pops up that's too tough for a sheriff or his deputies, we move right in and straighten the whole thing out—"

Hot anger and resentment flared in Doss' close-set eyes. He clenched his fist and strode a step nearer the lounging Lazy. "Listen, you range bum—"

BUT he got no further. The chair Lazy had been sprawled upon was suddenly flying across the room, where Lazy had kicked it. The lank Ladigan was suddenly towering over the squatty deputy.

"Think you better shut up, Tink," Lazy said with deceptive softness.

"Why, you—" The deputy's right fist flashed upward at the face above him. But he too had fallen prey to the deceptive lounging attitude of the stranger to Town. The blow never landed. Never came near landing.

Lazy's left hand moved too fast for the eye to follow. It slid inside Doss' swing,

parrying the blow just enough so that the fist whizzed six inches below its mark. Doss' fist stopped under Lazy's left armpit. Lazy's left hand flipped under the arm, and Lazy's right hand applied the pressure. The deputy howled in pain as Lazy applied force to his lever-hold. A quick twist and Doss sprawled ingloriously in the corner of the office, nursing a numbed and aching arm, that felt as if it had been pulled from its socket.

"You had that coming to you, Tink," the sheriff snapped. "Not," he added coldly to Lazy, "that I'll stand for you mussing up my deputies!"

"That works both ways, Sheriff," Lazy said drily. "I won't be mussed up by your deputies. I'll be going now."

"Not yet," Langstrom said. "Quirt and his bunch are still in town. You don't leave this office til they're gone."

"Can take care of myself," Lazy returned quickly, a slight peeve edging his voice.

"Don't I know it!" Langstrom grunted. "That's just why I'm chasing Magurn out of town — I don't want no more fights around here today. Tink, see that this Jasper don't leave the office till I get back." The lawman clapped his Stetson on and left the office. Lazy grinned at the fallen deputy and bent over to give him a hand. Doss snarled an oath and got to his feet unaided.

"I got a long memory, Ladigan," he growled, and Lazy could not mistake the murder in the man's eyes.

"Just a word of warning, Tink, and I'll leave you to your memories," Lazy drawled. "I've heard of lawmen trying to beat something out of a prisoner."

"Yeah? So what?"

"You seemed awful anxious, maybe I should say concerned about that evidence Bull dug up. Now, Bull ain't going to butt his head against his boodwar wall just for fun—so if there's any marks on him the next time I see 'im—I'll be looking you up, Tink."

The rumble of running hoofs drifted to the office. Through the grimy window, Lazy could see Quirt Magurn, Grant Tabor and their men spurring out of town, with Sheriff Langstrom standing on the board sidewalk watching them out of sight.

"So long, Tink," Lazy waved to the glowing deputy and stepped out on the street. The sheriff watched him closely as he ambled up the other side of the street. He

found Sloppy standing hipshot in front of the Silver Spangle.

He put Sloppy in the livery, then turned his long legs toward Town's only hotel, a bare, unpainted building three stories high.

With the clerk trailing nervously at his heels, Lazy inspected four or five rooms before picking one. It was a corner room that commanded a view of a large portion of Town's main street, including the Silver Spangle and the sheriff's office.

The sharp mountain peaks were already piercing a dying sun when he finished washing up and strolled up the street. At the Chinese restaurant, he consumed vast quantities of beans, beef and coffee, then roamed around town.

And always, he could see Sheriff Langstrom keeping a watchful eye on him. And that wasn't all, because Lazy could feel other eyes watching him; crafty eyes that watched him from cover.

Night fell but there was no merriment in Town. Lazy could sense a feeling of brooding expectancy that hung over the place, and that dogged everyone. The light in the sheriff's office was on, and he could see Tink Doss sitting in the office, with his feet on the sheriff's desk. There was no light in Bull's cell.

TWICE, Lazy moseyed near the cell, then stepped quickly in the shadows and started working his way to his partner's cell window. And each time a shadow had moved and he'd made out the shape of the sheriff's dented Stetson. After the second try, he shrugged and gave it up. But he couldn't keep from thinking about the sheriff; wondering just what the lawman's game was. First, Langstrom had stood between Lazy and Quirt Magurn, had stopped Quirt from his intended revenge for the shooting of Snag. And the sheriff had not even been peeved when Lazy threw Tink Doss. Was he trying the old game of giving a man enough rope, hoping that he, Lazy, would make some slip that would give the sheriff cause to arrest him? He shrugged and turned into the hotel.

The clerk was even more nervous than he'd been that afternoon and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a cork in a millstream as he handed Lazy his key.

"Funny thing," Lazy said solemnly, as he accepted it, "I can't remember the way to my room. When I get to the top of the

stairs, do I turn that way, or that way? Hmm, maybe," he cut in before the clerk could give him any instructions, "maybe you'd better take a light and show me the way."

The clerk nodded miserably, picked up the lamp with a hand that shook, and led the way upstairs.

"You lead the way," Lazy told him cheerfully. "I'll just trail along behind you." He dropped back until he was well out of the circle of light cast by the lamp, in fact, Lazy was in almost total darkness, though the hallway in front of the clerk was brilliantly lit by the lamp.

As they reached the second floor landing, Lazy heard a door open and shut quickly, but his room was around a corner, and he could not be sure it was his door. He trailed the clerk into the room.

"How come you rent this room to somebody else when I'm out?" he asked the sweating clerk.

"We—we don't!" the man stammered.

Lazy sniffed the air. "Fresh cigarette smoke. Hasn't been ten minutes since that tobacco was burned." He shrugged. "I reckon if that visitor wanted something real bad, he'll be back."

He locked his door, stuck a chair under the knob, made sure there was no way to approach his window from the outside, and then slipping his gun under his pillow, crawled under the covers.

It was early morning—false dawn—when he awoke, with the feel of something hard and cold against his temple.

"Lay still till I get that gun from under your pillow."

The chill of the gun-barrel sent ripples down Lazy's spine. In the dark, the man was fumbling for Lazy's gun and for a moment the gun-muzzle against his head wavered slightly. He caught his breath, his body tensing for a lightning move.

But some sixth sense must have warned the intruder. The gun-muzzle jabbed savagely into Lazy's temple. It was a grim and silent warning. Lazy relaxed. This was not the time to make his play. He felt the man withdraw his Colt from under his pillow.

"Be careful with it," Lazy said sarcastically. "It's loaded—might go off and hurt yourself."

The man chuckled grimly. In the darkness Lazy felt the man draw away, that

he might have time to shoot if Lazy tried to grab. "I was sent around to wake you up, so's you wouldn't miss anything, Ladigan. The boys didn't want you to miss the big show."

"Shore wouldn't want to miss that," Lazy grunted. "Any clowns?"

"Yeah, a dancing clown. He dangles from a rope and dances right on thin air."

"Huh?"

"The boys are going to lynch Bull Jackson in a few minutes."

CHAPTER VI

A Lynching Is Started

LAZY took that news in silence. Outwardly he was relaxed. He lay back, yawned and stretched his arms. Inwardly he seethed. His lank body ached for action; questions with no answers whizzed through his head.

Who was hanging Bull? How much time did he have? How tough a customer was this hombre that had awakened him? He couldn't tell. His captor was a dim blob against the faint grey that seeped through his window.

"Take a mighty strong rope to hang Bull," Lazy said. "He's heavy, you know."

"We got one that'll do the job," the man grunted.

"Glad of that. Hate to see you ruin a good rope." Lazy stretched again, twisting in the bed to pull his body muscles. The move brought him close to his captor's gun. He flexed his fingers. It was still dark in the interior of the room—he could not see the far wall. He swung his hand closer. The man shuffled his feet quickly—stepped back.

"Enough of that, Ladigan," he growled. "Git outta bed and stand over by the window, where I c'n watch you till it's light."

"Why not light the lamp?" Lazy stalled. Silhouetted against the window, he'd be at a disadvantage.

"We don't want no more fuss than necessary," the man replied. "C'mon, move!"

Lazy scooped up his clothes and pulled them on, then sat in the window sill and rolled a smoke. By the light of his match he saw the man's face—a stranger—and also he saw the chair was still against the door.

"Pretty slick," he murmured. "Cain't see how you got in."

The other chuckled sarcastically. "Simple. Dropped a rope out of the window of the room next to you. Man on the ground carried the end of the rope around the building, then threw it up to a man in the room on the other side of you. Climbed along the rope."

"Quirt's idea, I reckon." Maybe that would answer one question. It did.

"Yeah, he thinks of everything. And he didn't want you hornin' in while the boys were putting Jackson away."

"It don't make sense," Lazy drawled. "Bull's got evidence that'll convict the killer of your boss—and yet you try to lynch him without giving him a chance to tell it. Maybe you could give me the answer to that riddle."

"In the first place," the man said slowly, and with a bite, "it ain't none of your damn business. In the second, we ain't *trying* to lynch Jackson—we're doing it! And in the third place, the Cross Bar H will take care of its own. We'll find Hawkins' killer and deal with him in our own way."

Lazy said no more. He turned and looked down the street. There was no sign of life at all in Town at that early hour of the morning. But wait—even as he looked, a light sprang up in a house at the edge of Town, a distant door slammed.

"About time," the man with the gun grunted, as the light came on.

"Whose house?" Lazy asked, and was not surprised at the answer. Sheriff Langstrom's. Getting him out of Town on some wild goose chase before the ruckus started. "Kinda funny," Lazy said. "You telling me all this?"

"Yeah, ain't it? But the joke's on you, 'cause you ain't going to be able to spread the gossip."

The light in the distant house went out again, and faintly there came the thud of a galloping horse, dying down as the sheriff raced away from town.

HARDLY had the hoofbeats died away when things began to happen in the streets of Town. Men filtered into the street. The light was getting stronger now, and Lazy could make out the individual shapes of the various men. A band of horsemen rode in and pulled to halt in front of the Silver Spangle. They dismounted and, in a compact body, moved down the street toward the jail.

Other lights began to flicker in Town, now, as curious townspeople stared through dawn-murked windows. A door creaked open somewhere. A single shot blared from the tight crowd. There was a tinkle of glass, and the bang of a door being shut hastily.

"They don't want any interference," Lazy observed drawlingly.

"And they won't get any, either," the guard laughed coldly.

So this was how Quirt Magurn ran things! When it was all over, Bull's death would be shrugged off as being lynched by an angry mob. Actually, it was cold-blooded murder, well-planned and carried out in a cold-blooded way. Lazy sucked nervously on his cigarette.

The "lynch mob" was nearing the jail now. A light flared in the sheriff's office, then the front door of the office flung open and Tink Doss stood framed in the lighted rectangle. Tink waggled two Colts at the oncoming mob.

"Hold 'er right where you are, Ab Nason!" Tink yelled. "Them masks ain't hiding nothing from me! You ain't taking no prisoner outta this jail while I'm still alive!"

"Man! Oh, man!" Lazy crowed admiringly. "What brave talk that Doss does spout! And listen, will you? Throwing the blame right on Ab Nason and his bunch. Smart!"

"Not him," the guard said. "Quirt's idea."

"Doss ought to be making money hand over fist," Lazy guessed, "drawing a deputy's pay and on Quirt's payroll too."

The guard didn't answer, and they both watched the drama unfolding in the street. The leader of the lynch mob was talking to Tink Doss, but his low-voiced words did not carry to the watchers in the hotel.

Doss waved his guns angrily and yelled at them to disperse. The "lynch mob" moved in closer, six-guns and rifles bristling from every man.

"Quirt, of course, thought about the brands the horses might carry," Lazy said suddenly, his eyes wandering up the street to the Silver Spangle, where the mounts were. "The wrong brand would give the whole play away."

"Don't worry, he did," the other grunted, never relaxing his guard, and again a silence fell between them.

Down in the street, a lone man slipped from the crowd, and made his way toward the back of the jail.

"His job is to sneak around back and surprise Tink," Lazy laughed sarcastically, "and Tink Doss didn't see him, being, of course, blind in all five of his eyes. It sure took a master mind to figure it all out."

Lazy's guard had walked over close to the window and was watching the street with one eye, and Lazy with the other. His Colt was cocked, and its gaping muzzle pointed squarely at Lazy's head.

Lazy's brow wrinkled in thought, then he almost dropped his cigarette and grabbed at it quick. At the first sign of Lazy's move, his guard jammed the Colt tight against his temple; Lazy could see the man's thumb quivering as it held the hammer.

Lazy sighed, and shifted to a more comfortable position in the window sill. Casually, he glanced down to the ground, mentally calculating that it was a fifteen-foot drop; mentally figuring his chances of being able to get around the corner of the building before his guard could line his sights on him.

A startled yell broke in on his thoughts. Tink Doss had discovered that he's been outflanked. With loud bellowings and dire threats, Tink surrendered his guns, put up a weak fight in an attempt to stem the tide that flowed through the door and into the jail.

LAZY waited expectantly as the crowd entered, seething at his inability to move. For a moment, all was silent in the jail, then there was a roar, a crash, and a clang as a cell door banged violently.

A struggling mass of humanity spewed through the door of the jail. It swirled and eddied around a central figure—a giant figure that swung great fists in a mighty arc, that bellowed its defiance to the whole world as it fought to free itself of the leeches that clung to it. Lazy's long fingers clenched till his knuckles whitened, as he followed Bull's heroic but futile battle.

The guard burst out. "Look at that fool fight!"

"He's just getting warmed up," Lazy said. "Look!"

Bull had gotten a good grip on one of his tormentors. He raised the luckless one

high in the air—ready to crash him down into the crowd.

Lazy felt his spine grow cold along its whole length. He was afraid to turn his head; afraid it might give him away.

He simply reached back with one hand and struck at the gun held close to his head.

The gun roared deafeningly, right at his ear, but its aim had been thrown off enough. The man cursed grimly as Lazy hurled himself off the window sill.

He got one arm and his legs around the man—his other hand found the man's gun wrist and twisted. The struggle was a grim, silent one—the only sounds were the labored breathing and the grunts of pain and effort as they struggled back and forth across the room.

His adversary was powerful and probably outweighed Lazy ten pounds, but the lanky one had never relaxed his scissors hold. The guard got one hand free, swung viciously. Short, choppy blows thudded against Lazy's face. His vision became blurred, and the room began to spin. He buried his head against the man's chest and hung on, twisting and straining the man's gun arm.

The guard slammed him against the wall, brought his knee up. Lazy twisted aside quickly. The blow missed his groin, but landed in his stomach. Nausea swept over him and he felt his strength begin to seep away. He got one foot against the wall, pushed hard.

Struggling, they stumbled across the room. The guard hit and bed and sprawled across it, Lazy on top. Quickly, he put his advantage to good use. He loosed his scissors hold, drove his knee into the man's side. The guard grunted with pain, and Lazy threw his whole weight into a vicious twist of the man's wrist. He felt the grip slacken, heard the gun clatter to the floor.

SOMEBODY was pounding on the door now, wanting to know what the racket was. The blood was pounding and roaring in Lazy's head as he fought one hand free, smashed his fist into the guard's face. The guard twisted in an effort to break free, then he was striving to get at something between his shoulder blades.

Dimly, Lazy heard the people in the hall. They were starting to batter the door down now. And from the street came a loud shout of triumph. That would be Bull steadily losing against overwhelming odds.

Lazy drove another blow into the man's face. The guard blubbered blood through crushed lips, still trying to twist away. Lazy drew back for another blow. The guard twisted free, kicked mightily and was off the bed. And as he twisted, a bright, gleaming object fell from the neck of his shirt on the bed.

A knife.

Sobbing profanity, the guard was diving for the fallen gun. Lazy scooped up the knife as the man's hand closed over the gun.

"Drop it!" Lazy ordered. The man looked up, his fingers laying loosely on the handle of the Colt. The knife lay in Lazy's hand, and his hand was drawn back for a throw.

Indecision was written on the guard's face. He ran his tongue over his crushed, bleeding lips, staring at the blade.

"Back away from it," Lazy ordered, "less you want to see if you can beat my throw with a bullet."

Lazy caught his breath. Had the sheriff told anyone that he couldn't throw a knife? If that news was out—if the sheriff had told it as a joke on Magurn—

The guard licked his lips again. "It's been done," he mumbled, his eyes never leaving the knife.

"Quirt didn't try it today," Lazy said slowly. That decided the man. He backed away from the gun.

Outside, the battering ram hit the door again. A leg of the chair broke and the door swung inward.

And a girl almost fell into the room!

CHAPTER VII

'A Lynching Is Stopped

IN one flashing instant, Lazy got a picture of red hair; the color the dying sun paints on low-hanging clouds at sunset. The hair fell in a turbulent mass, framing a small, oval face, large brown eyes—that right now were snapping in anger—a pert nose that tilted in a manner both provocative and haughty, full rounded lips, and a chin that was as delicate as it was firm and stubborn. And she was little; barely five feet.

"But lordy, lordy!" Lazy thought, "she could tame a wildcat, or a man, with a snap of her fingers. What a little woman lacks in size, she sure makes up in spunk!"

The girl was dressed in ordinary men's levis, a pale blue shirt. And she held a businesslike .32 double-action revolver!

"Cass! What's going on here! Who's this you're fighting with? What're you doing in this room? What's going on in Town?"

The appearance of the girl had acted like magic on Lazy's guard. He'd completely forgotten his belligerent intentions toward Lazy and had backed away sheepishly under the rapid-fire of the girl's questions. The girl was watching Cass intently, but the moment Lazy moved she whirled, the .32 swinging too.

"Stay right where you are, you!" her voice was that of one that was used to being obeyed. "You just stay hitched till I find out what's going on here!"

"Sorry," Lazy drawled. "I haven't got time for that." He swung his long legs off the bed and strode across the room to where the gun lay. It belonged to Cass, and he saw his own gun laying under the wash stand. He bent to pick up Cass' gun.

The girl had watched Lazy move—after her order for him to be still—with a look of unbelief in her eyes. And the look turned to one of blazing anger as Lazy strolled across the room, still holding Cass' knife, and started to scoop up the gun. With an exclamation, Lazy didn't know whether it was anger, or surprise, she jumped forward and shoved the .32 against his chest.

"Stand right where you are!" her voice was quivering. "And don't think you're going to get out of here till I find out what this is all about! Why were you and Cass fighting?"

"That's Lazy Ladigan," Cass broke in. "Bull Jackson's pard."

"Oh!" Her tone suggested that she'd heard, and heard *plenty*, about Lazy Ladigan. "So you're the man that's going to get Jackson out of jail, so he won't have to stand trial for killing—"

"Bull's already out of jail," Lazy snapped, "and they're getting ready to hang him, while we stand here and palaver. Take that thing outta my way, lady!"

He knocked her gun aside, bent quickly and picked up the one on the floor. Two long strides carried him to the wash stand, and he slipped his own gun belt on and buckled it.

The girl was watching him, and Lazy read the uncertainty in her eyes. And while

she wavered, the lanky newcomer to Town stepped to the window.

The fight was over, down in the street. Bull was down, and three or four men were busy hog-tying him. The crowd was impatient to get started toward the big tree near the edge of town that served as the lever for Old Judge Lynch. As Lazy watched, one of the men tying Bull drew back his fist and drove it into Bull's face.

Lazy whipped his own gun out, taking aim at the man, but something jabbed him in the back, and Cass's voice rasped in his ear.

"Gimme back them guns, Ladigan. You ain't stopping this hanging." Lazy turned. Cass had the girl's .32. Lazy's eyes sought the girl.

"So you're in on Bull's lynching, too?"

"No, I'm not!" the girl retorted. "But I'm going to do nothing to stop it. My name is Helen Eldridge—my father owns the Eagle Track. The man Jackson killed worked for us, like Cass does. I don't believe in lynching, but in this case, you couldn't stop it—and Jackson's evidently getting his due, anyway."

Lazy's normally gay mouth tightened and became grim. He still held his gun, but it hung at his side. Cass was boring the muzzle of the .32 into his stomach.

"You better get out of here, ma'am, because in a minute, Cass is going to have to shoot for his life—I think I can take a couple of those .32 slugs and still throw a .45 slug—"

The girl's eyes opened wide. Involuntarily, she threw up her hand and started to speak, but something in Ladigan's expression checked her words. Lazy was watching her closely, apparently paying no attention to Cass.

BUT he and Cass were actually touching each other, and the slightest move by the Eagle Track would be instantly transmitted to Lazy. But Cass wasn't moving. He still held the .32, but Lazy could hear his breathing getting a little shorter and louder, and he could imagine Cass was beginning to sweat.

For Cass was a cowpuncher, and he held a cowpuncher's contempt for any gun smaller than a .45. Under no other circumstances could you have forced a small gun into Cass' hand, and even now that he had it, he wasn't putting too much faith in its killing power.

"I—I believe he means it," the girl said half to herself. "Give me the gun back, Cass."

Cass' breath expelled sharply as he passed the gun back to her. Lazy threw a glance at the street. They had Bull on his feet now, were forcing him along. The towering Jackson was still fighting every step of the way, but now he was fighting a losing battle.

Scantly-clad citizens of Town lined the sidewalk and watched the grim drama unfold in the bright light of a newly risen sun. But nobody elected to object, and none of the townspeople gave the lynchers a hand. They were mute spectators of this raw chapter of the West.

Lazy whirled from the window, brushed past Cass and the girl and hit the hallway at a run. He stumbled into the goggle-eyed hotel clerk who'd been hovering far enough in the background to stay out of harm's way. Lazy grabbed his arm and grabbed him along, never slackening his pace.

"Where's your scattergun?" he rapped out as he jerked the clerk down the steps two at a time. The clerk mumbled and pointed. Lazy slid behind the desk, rummaged around on the shelf under it, and came up holding a shotgun, sawed off so that only about fourteen inches of the barrels remained.

"Extra shells?"

The clerk pointed again, and Lazy found almost a full box. He ran out of the hotel stuffing them into his hip pockets.

The lynch crowd had its back to Lazy, as it moved slowly up the street, dragging the protesting Bull. The townspeople were staring at the lynch mob, and Lazy had covered almost half the distance, before any one noticed him.

Then instantly, there was a wild scrambling, as the good people of Town sought shelter. They scurried off the sidewalks, seeking a good stout wall between them and the open street.

Running along, Lazy had checked the scattergun; both barrels had loads. As the townspeople scattered, he slowed down to a walk, gauging the distance to the mob.

"Painful from here, but not fatally so," he grunted, and whipped the gun to his shoulder.

The ominous quiet of Town was shattered by the roaring blast of the shotgun as

both barrels spewed flame and lead into the backs of the lynch mob.

The men in the rear howled with pain as buckshot peppered their backs, but as Lazy had figured, the range was too far for the gun to be fatal. Consternation hit the ranks of the crowd at the gun's mighty blast, and Lazy took advantage of the surprise.

His long legs flashed in a fast sprint as he cut the distance in half, breaking the shotgun and shoving fresh shells in as he ran.

Half the crowd had lost their masks in the scuffle to bind Bull. Quirt Magurn's hung by one ear. The scar on the foreman's face was fish-belly white as he whirled, hand streaking for his gun. But his hand stopped at the sight of Lazy and the still smoking shotgun.

Lazy knew he had to play his advantage fast, for he wouldn't hold it long.

"Get away from the crowd, Bull! Live-ly!"

"Yeah, man!" Bull's yell of joy rent the air. His hands were tied behind his back, and his feet were also tied, but with enough play that he could walk. He shuffled quickly away from his captors, off to one side and well out of range, should Lazy start using the scattergun.

Cold sweat was breaking out on Lazy. "Ticklish business," he grunted, "getting Bull untied and riding herd on that crew of lead slingers at the same time—"

But something was the matter. Bull's face was getting red, and he was sputtering profanity. He was looking beyond Lazy.

"Nice work, Ladigan." Tink Doss' voice broke in, and it was dry and sarcastic. "Town oughta thank you for saving its prisoner. I'll take over now."

"Nothing doing," Lazy snapped shortly, never for an instant taking his eyes off the men in front of him.

"I said," Doss' voice was rising in anger, "that I'd take over now, Ladigan. Put that damn shotgun down!" His words were punctuated by two clicks of a Colt being cocked.

"Hold to what you got, Lazy!" Bull roared. Doss cursed Jackson, then gave a startled yell.

A yell that was cut short by the spiteful crack of a Derringer!

"There's one more shot in this gadget, Doss!" Bull was telling the deputy, and

out of the corner of his eyes, Lazy could see Bull twisted around, the Derringer almost hidden in his huge, tightly bound hands, "bend down and try to pick up that gun I shot out of your hand, and I'll send that slug straight through your purple gizzard!"

Lazy moved sideways and back, till Doss, too, was in his range of vision. Bull shuffled forward, and gathered in the deputy's gun.

"You'll find a knife that belongs to a fellow named Cass, in my hip pocket, Bull," Lazy told him.

"Okay," the giant moved over, fished around till he got the knife and started sawing himself loose. "Okay, I'm loose. Gimme one of them spare guns you got."

"Turn around!" Lazy ordered the lynch mob. There was a slight hesitation, but now there were two Colts, held in Bull's huge fists, and a shotgun, staring at them. They turned. Crisply, Lazy ordered them to unbuckle their guns, drop them, then march up the street. Bull moved forward, picked up a couple of rifles, another six-gun, and he and Lazy moved back slowly toward the horses tethered in front of the Silver Spangle.

"I'll take that big bay—looks like it can stand hard work," Bull rumbled. "You take that stringy-looking black. We'll chouse the rest of 'em out of town ahead of us—nothing like slowing up pursuit, huh, boy?"

They untied all the horses and started them down the street out of town. Quickly, they flung themselves in the saddle and galloped off, driving the rest of the horses before them.

As they flashed past the hotel, Lazy looked up. Helen Eldridge was standing on the front porch.

"And sorry she didn't get to see Bull hang, I reckon," Lazy muttered, then bent low as guns crashed behind them and lead sang overhead.

"Quit daydreaming, you lazy galoot!" Bull yelled. "There's trouble aplenty ahead."

CHAPTER VIII

A Long Chase

IN ANOTHER moment or two they had outdistanced the sixguns back in Town, and were racing across the Valley. Lazy twisted in his saddle.

Town was boiling. Men raced up and

down the streets. There was a knot of men at the livery stable, and he could see them lead out horses. Others were racing toward the edge of Town, trying to catch the horses he and Bull had driven away.

"Looks like we've got all the lead we can use," Lazy chuckled. "You know this Valley better'n I do. Where do we go from here?"

"Straight for the Notch," Bull answered.

"Notch! Hey, that sounds like we're leaving this place. How come? Your feet getting frosty?"

"Why, you ornery case of sleeping sickness!" Bull roared. "If I wasn't in a hurry, I'd slap you 'side the head till it rang like Christmas bells! I got good reasons for leaving the Valley. I—"

"Yeah," Lazy drawled with a look of cherubic innocence. "I've seen one of those reasons. It's long and snaky, got a loop on one end, and it's usually found hanging over the limb of a tree."

Bull choked and sputtered for a moment. When he found his voice, he used it at full strength to tell Lazy where he could go, the best way to get there, what he hoped Lazy would find when he arrived, and offered to start him on his way with a kick in the pants.

"And while you're on your way," Jackson wound up, "I'll go on to Hondros, like I planned."

"Hondros? That's where this Henry Eldridge is right now, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but that ain't the reason we're going. We're going to see a United States marshal and drag him over to the Valley and show him what I've found. Anyhow, you don't know this valley like I do. It's nothing but a pocket in the mountains, with very few trails leading out. Why, twenty men, with rifles, and scattered around the trails leading in and out of this place, could bottle this place up tighter than a Scotchman."

"It was bottled up," Lazy reminded him, "but I trickled through."

"Yeah, I know," Bull answered, throwing a glance over his shoulder. "But that was 'Ab Nason and his bunch. I think Snag was just riding around when they bumped into you. But now it's different! We made monkeys outta the Eagle Track and the Cross Bar H. They want our scalps! Between the two, they must have forty-fifty men on their payrolls. If we don't get out now, we won't get out. Yonder they come!"

Lazy glanced back. Town was a forlorn blot in the distance, half obscured by a fast moving cloud of dust kicked up by a band of riders.

"Too far, even for a Winchester," Lazy murmured, "but we'll let 'em know we see 'em." He slipped the rifle—he didn't know whose—out of the saddle boot and levered two quick shots. The range was so great he didn't bother to shoulder the gun, just fired from the hip.

"Went about half way, maybe," Bull gauged. "Now if we had one of them high-powered rifles, like the one that killed Jonas Hawkins, we could braid the whiskers on Quirt Magurn's face."

"What?"

"Hawkins was killed with a high-powered rifle—the slug had a steel jacket over it, and even though Hawkins' killer shot him from a long ways off, the bullet went clean through him.

"How'd you find that out?" Lazy asked.

"The only doctor in Town is a liquor-head," Bull answered, talking loud so his words carried through the whipping wind. "I poured rotgut down him one night and he started talking about 'the clean little hole the bullet made.' Said you couldn't hardly tell which was the hole the bullet entered and which hole it left by. A Winchester don't make that kind of a hole. It goes in clean, but takes a chunk with it when it goes out."

But Bull ignored the crack and went on. "The next day I took Doc for a ride—you know, get him out in the open and cure his headache. He showed me where Hawkins was found—traced lines on the ground how the body had been laying. And then," Bull's voice was carrying a note of triumph, "I started searching—figuring where the killer must have stood—on a far ridge—and the angle the bullet traveled. And I found this!"

He fished something out of his watch pocket and handed it over. Lazy whistled softly. It was a steel-jacketed bullet of the type used in high-powered rifles. He hefted the bullet and handed it back to Bull. Bull put it back in his pocket, and they both looked backwards. The pursuit was hanging on grimly, but wasn't gaining.

"So then," Bull went on loftily, "I high-tailed it over to the ridge where I figured the shot was fired, and found this!"

"This" was the empty cartridge!

"All we do now," Lazy said, "is find a

hombre in this valley with a high-powered caliber rifle that fits this shell, and we got the killer. Right?"

"Yeah," Bull laughed, "that's all."

Then the big man sobered instantly, peering ahead intently. They were almost at the bottom of the trail that led upward to the Notch.

"You claim good eyesight," Bull said. "Look up on the side of the mountain—right off the trail. See that big pine that looks like it's been struck by lightning? 'Bout twenty feet this side of it—"

"Four men, maybe five," Lazy nodded grimly. "Hiding in the brush. Look! The sun flashed on something—that fellow is taking a closer look at us with a pair of glasses!"

"Yeah, now they're shifting position."

The two watched the hidden men on the mountainside intently, as their horses drummed along the Valley floor, nearing the upward trail. The four men split, two on one side of the trail, and two on the other.

"Something tells me," Lazy thought aloud, "those boys aren't going to take kindly to us riding by."

Bull didn't answer, but whipped his own rifle to his shoulder and fired upward. Almost instantly four rifles stuttered from the brush.

"They know who we are—saw us with glasses," Bull grunted, "and their intentions are teetotally warlike. We won't ride through the Notch with a whole skin to-day, boy."

"I didn't want to leave the Valley anyhow," Lazy grunted sarcastically. "I like the homey atmosphere 'round here—neighbors banging away at each other with their weapons, and hanging people in the early morning to whip up a good appetite for breakfast."

"This way," Bull said, and they pulled off to the left, heading across a narrow neck of the Valley that would lead them again to a solid wall of mountains. "Yeah, I agree with you. I was getting homesick at the thought of leaving. Well, I ain't homesick no more, 'cause we ain't leaving!"

TURNING as they had, gave their pursuers a decided advantage, and the lynch mob behind them cut the distance almost in half. Rifle fire began to pop from Quirt Magurn's men. Lazy stood up in his

stirrups, nestled his rifle snugly against his cheek and fired.

The bullet plowed dirt a few feet in front of their pursuers, and threw the chase into momentary confusion. The band broke and scattered for a moment, then closed ranks again.

"This can't go on forever," he told Bull. "This horse I'm riding is beginning to blow hard. Where're we heading?"

Bull pointed to the mountains across the narrow neck of the Valley. "There's a trapper's cabin there. We can hole up there and put up an argument. Then, watching our chance, we can work our way to the top of the mountains, then mosey away from here fast."

But Lazy had discovered another disturbing fact. Off to their left were three riders; at present only tiny dots in the distance, but it looked as if they were gradually closing in. They were slightly ahead of him and Bull now. They would lose some of that advantage by closing in, but not very much. He pointed them out to Bull. The big man nodded glumly.

"Quirt's pack closing in for the kill. I didn't want to bother you with it—being only a minor factor—but do you see those men?"

He pointed a huge finger almost straight ahead. Lazy winced as he made out five riders topping a distant swell, and spurting toward them.

"We ain't going to make it to that cabin, and this bay's getting mighty tired," Bull groaned. "Listen, there's a farmer's place over the hump yonder—"

"Women and kids," Lazy said. "And when this ruckus stars, lead's gonna fly thick and fast."

"He's got a barn," Bull argued. "It's a long ways from his house. We'll cuddle up in it and see if we can't discourage some of these lead-hungry varmints."

Lazy nodded reluctantly, and once more they swung, this time to the right.

"The place is almost at the foot of the mountains," Bull yelled over his shoulder, as his bay drew forward. "We'll feed Quirt and his crew a heavy dose of lead, then break for the hills when it gets dark."

Their laboring horses pounded up the slight hump, and Lazy noticed grimly that both horses lost plenty of speed climbing the slight grade. The main group behind them, still on level ground, gained considerably and lead began to whistle uncomfort-

ably close. Then they were on top, and a yell went up from Bull.

Ahead lay the farm all right, and the barn, just as Bull had said, was a good distance from the house.

But four riders were cutting across the valley, and even as they looked, these four cut off their route to the barn.

A blast of fire came from the five men dead ahead. Slugs whined only inches away. The four men near the barn opened up and more lead began to bite past.

"Where'd they all come from?" Lazy muttered.

"Quirt's men," Bull answered shortly, slipping shells into his rifle. "They're just like a army. Damn if I know how he got 'em so quick, but there they are!"

He levered four quick shots at the five men ahead. One man jerked and grabbed his saddle horn with both hands, his gun kicking up dust as it hit the ground. Faint yells reached their ears, and the charge of that bunch broke quickly.

Behind them came a rolling volley of fire, the heavy roaring of Colts blending with the spiteful, slashing crack of rifles.

Quirt's main bunch had topped the rise.

"This way!" Lazy yelled. He neck-reined the black sharply toward a cornfield. The patch of corn covered the top of a small hump of ground. Lazy guided his horse along the edge of the neat rows of corn, grabbed his rifle and saddlebags, threw one leg over his saddle and slid off his running horse.

He hit the ground in a rolling tumble that brought him to his feet with the quickness of a cat. A yell of triumph broke from the men closing in, but it was cut short.

Lazy dropped to one knee, whipped the Winchester up and threw lead. The saddle of the foremost horse was suddenly empty; another man yelled and clutched a shattered arm; a third felt his hat fly off and decided he was too close and turned around.

A few feet away, Bull's six-guns began to hammer, and their blasts broke the charge. The bunch swung away, their gunfire rolling in thunderous crescendo as they galloped past.

Lazy and Bull turned and raced into the cornfield. The tall, closely-growing stalks hid them effectively, as they worked their way toward the top of the hill. From that point, their guns commanded every approach. Panting from exertion, they dropped

their spare guns on the ground and caught their breath.

"Nice view," Bull muttered glumly between gasps.

"Yeah. It would be perfect if Quirt Magurn was skylighted on the horizon in Winchester range."

CHAPTER IX

Trapped

"**D**ON'T ever go hoping such things," Bull grumbled.

"Quirt figures he's a general, and generals are always way back behind the fighting. That's where you'll find Quirt."

Lazy took his hat off and stood up, but not at his full height, because in such a position his head would tower over the cornstalks.

"Whatcha see?"

"Nothing," Lazy answered. "Not one darn thing, but I'm guessing there's a bunch just over that swell—yep—there's a head poking over, and some more behind that haystack—in other words, we're surrounded, and how!"

"Let 'em come!" Bull rumbled. "We got a seven-course dinner o' lead we'll feed 'em. Let's see, now, three rifles, five six-guns, a sawed-off shotgun and a Derringer." His huge, stubble-covered face cracked in a grin. "We can fight a full-fledged battle 'thout even reloading!"

"And how many times can we reload?" Lazy wanted to know.

There was a rasping sound as Bull scratched his chin reflectively. "Pity you couldn't forget them embarrassing questions you're always asking. Hmm, lessee now—we're well heeled for a short fight, but it's a fact that we ain't gonna overwork ourselves reloading."

"Still not a soul in sight," Lazy reported. "Not even around the farmhouse. Reckon the farmer chased his family inside and barred the doors. I don't like this fighting on somebody else's ground."

For a better look he stuck his head a little higher. A rifle behind the haystack slashed, and a corn tassel right at Lazy's ear exploded. Somebody yelled orders, and other guns began to bark from all sides. The bullets made a rippling sound as they slashed their way through the cornstalks.

"The top of this hill makes too good a

target," Lazy said, as slugs began to churn up dirt all around them. "You go that way." Hastily, they gathered up their guns and crawled away, Bull moving down one side of the hill, and Lazy the other.

"That farmer musta been drunk the day he planted this corn," Bull yelled. "Never saw such crooked rows."

"Quit beefing," Lazy answered. "They're our protection now. Watch out!"

About half the guns stopped shooting, but the remaining ones began firing faster than ever. Horsemen suddenly broke from cover from behind the barn, the haystack and the hump of ground, spurring straight for the cornfield.

Lazy jumped to his feet. He would have to ignore that hail of lead whining around him if he expected to stop the charge. He drew a careful bead on the lead horse. His Winchester cracked, and the horse crumpled to the ground, its rider hurtling straight ahead, arms and legs flailing the air. He hit the ground in a heap, rolled over and got groggily to his hands and knees. Lazy turned his rifle on the next rider.

His first shot tore a chunk out of the saddle. The rider yelled hoarsely and started sawing on the reins. Lazy's second shot ripped a jagged hole through the flapping corner of his vest. The man jerked his mount around and spurred madly back.

The man on foot staggered to his feet and shambled toward his fallen gun. As he bent to pick it up, Lazy placed a rifle slug six inches from his outstretched fingers. The gunman forgot his gun and raced for cover. Lazy turned his attention to the barn, tore splinters out of the corner of it with Winchester lead and silenced two yapping Colts. Guns popped sporadically for a moment or two, then silence closed in.

"Bull? How'd you make out?"

"Swell," Bull rumbled. "Popped one of them through the shoulder and he dropped his shooter about twenty feet from the cornfield. We'll leave it there for future reference, huh, boy?" Bull crawled closer to Lazy. "This is a tight!"

Lazy nodded. "As tight a squeeze as a bridegroom gives his bride," he drawled. "Reckon I'll play us a tune. It helps me think—and I see where I gotta think our way out of this."

Bull snorted in derision. "Yeah, that's it. One little thought gets us out of the

cornfield. Another little thought gits us horses, and another great big thought gets us plumb away from the Val—hey! you ain't going to play that damn thing now, are you?"

BUT Lazy had cupped his mouth organ to his lips. A melancholy note wheezed out and mingled with the rustling of the corn. Then abruptly, as he shifted to another note, the harmonica squeaked like a rusty nail being pulled. Lazy beat the thing against his palm.

"Some of this cornfield dirt got in it," he muttered.

"Not half enough!" Bull grimaced. "Now look what you've done!" The besiegers were answering the harmonica with gunfire. Suddenly Lazy shoved his musical weapon in his pocket.

"I got it! The way to get out! Listen, the next time they rush us, we both sneak down as close to the edge of the field as he can, and hold our fire, and when two of them get close—"

"Gotcha!" Bull rumbled. "Hey! Here they come!" Bull stared for a moment, then cursed roundly. "They musta read our minds. Look at 'em would you?" He hurried back to his post on the other side.

This time eight or nine riders broke from cover, but instead of charging the cornfield, started circling it, Indian fashion, hanging over the sides of their mounts and shooting across their saddles.

Lazy took careful aim at a leg, the only visible part of the raiders, and squeezed the trigger. There was a howl of pain, and the rider crashed to the ground. Cursing and moaning, he tried to hobble to shelter, but his leg wouldn't hold his weight, and he went down again, yelling for help. The Indian charge was breaking, the riders once more seeking cover.

"Lay out there and rot, you clumsy son!" Quirt Magurn's voice shrilled through the din. Lazy jerked his rifle around and whipped two slugs at the sound of Quirt's voice. Magurn yelled derisive profanity at him. The wounded man turned and looked curiously at the cornfield, surprised that no slug had yet cut him down, then continued his slow crawl to shelter.

"That was a swell idea you had," Bull said, crawling over, "only it don't look like they're going to give us a chance to use it. What now?"

"Take to the edge of the cornfield like

we planned," Lazy answered. "They won't be expecting us to be there, and we might pull a surprise and get a horse. Remember, hold your fire."

Bull grunted and crawled off. Lazy worked his way down the crooked rows till he dared go no further for fear of being seen.

Cautiously, he peered out, but there was no one in sight, and then he caught sight of an approaching rider.

He blinked and looked again, not believing what he saw. But the rider was closer now, and there could be no mistake.

It was Helen Eldridge.

As the girl drew closer, loud yells of warning came from the hidden men but the girl came on. In plain sight of Lazy, she rode to the top of the knoll, behind which Quirt Magurn was hiding, and dismounted. She looked angry, and Lazy wriggled forward, hoping to get in earshot. Pushing some weeds ahead of him as a shield, he reached the last row of corn. The girl was stamping her foot in anger.

"I've nothing to hide for, and I'm not getting behind anything!" Her angry voice carried to Lazy: "Grant, collect our men. We're going back home—and dad'll have plenty to say about all this lynching when he gets back!"

Quirt's voice came to Lazy's ears, but the girl cut him short, and repeated her order to the man she called Grant.

"Maybe I could tell you something that would change your mind," a new voice entered the conversation.

"I wouldn't believe anything you said, Deck Lavell!" the girl flashed quickly.

"Just the same," Deck's voice went on, faintly sarcastic, "we got Bull Jackson holed up in that cornfield. And Jackson killed a friend of mine, Joe Branch. I saw Jackson do it with my own eyes!"

"That's the first I'd heard you saw the killing," Helen Eldridge retorted, "and I don't believe it. Why didn't you shoot Jackson right there on the spot, then?"

"I'd left my gun at home."

"Now you are lying, Lavell! You'd never be out of arm's reach of your gun!"

"It was busted, and I was having it fixed, I tell you!" Lavell's voice rose angrily. "I was in the dark, about fifty yards from the campfire when it happened. Jackson was telling Joe about some evidence he'd found. Joe called him a liar. Jackson shot Joe

through the arm, then laughed at Joe, helpless like that, before he killed him."

It was plain that the girl didn't believe Lavell's story that he'd seen the killing. There was some more talk too low for Lazy to hear, then with an angry flip of her head, she caught her horse.

"Stop her, you fool!" Magurn yelled, and a man popped into sight, making a grab at her reins. Lazy raised his rifle, settling his sights on the man's leg. But there was no need.

Helen Eldridge kicked him in the shoulder, sent him spinning to the ground, and galloped off.

"I'm going to bring Sheriff Langstrom!" she called over her shoulder. Magurn ripped out an oath, bellowed an order to overtake her. Two riders started after her, but Lazy discouraged it with two well-placed slugs, and the riders raced back for cover.

THAT brought a volley of fire, and Lazy retreated hastily toward the top of the hill. Bull crawled up.

"What was all the palaver down there?" Bull wanted to know. "Saw the gal, but couldn't hear nothing."

"She tried to make some hombre named Grant collect the Eagle Track men and vamoose. Quirt talked Grant into staying. Who is this Grant hombre?"

"Grant Tabor. He's foreman of Eldridge's ranch."

"What's he doing hobnobbing with Quirt Magurn?" Lazy asked.

"That's simple," Bull answered promptly. "He's after me. Remember, the hombre they say I killed—Joe Branch—was an Eldridge man, which means he was one of Grant Tabor's crew."

"Was this Grant Tabor in that mob that tried to string you up?" Lazy persisted.

Bull shook his head. "Didn't see him. Tabor's been trying to get that redheaded Eldridge spitfire to marry him—but he won't make no headway thataway."

Lazy nodded, thinking of what the man named Deck Lavell had told Helen Eldridge about seeing Bull shoot Joe Branch.

"Listen, Bull, you say you think somebody plugged Joe Branch from the bushes—while you were trying to shoot his gun out of his hand, that right?"

Bull nodded glumly, and Lazy slapped him on the shoulder.

"I think I know who did that little trick,

you old cow-thief—if we can just get him to talk!"

"A lot of good that'll do us," Bull grunted sourly, "with us setting in this cornfield like fatted calves ready for the slaughter."

"Oh, yeah? I got more good news. That 'redheaded Eldridge spitfire'—like you called her—is going after the sheriff! We got a beeoootiful lady riding to our rescue!"

Bull started at him curiously, and then in a low voice, said slowly, "That's funny, Lazy—funny as hell—for Helen Eldridge to be helping us out—remember that high-powered rifle that killed Hawkins—remember Joe Branch, who worked for Eldridge—calling me a liar when I told him the evidence? I found out who bought the rifle from the store in Chicago where it was sold. That rifle belongs to Henry Eldridge!"

Lazy's jaw sagged, for once shaken out of his indolent, carefree attitude. Henry Eldridge, the man they were going to pin the murder on! And his daughter—right now riding to save them!

Bull jerked his head up quickly, then grinned tightly.

"And we won't hold out till the girl gets back with the sheriff, either. Magurn's getting ready to set fire to this cornfield."

CHAPTER X

Escape

LAZY followed Bull's pointing finger. Smoke was rising from behind the knoll that hid Magurn and his men. And then, in a careless moment, somebody held the torch aloft.

"That's bad," Lazy said, half to himself, as he saw the torch. He wondered how Magurn figured on getting the torch to the cornfield. "You sure you couldn't've made a mistake about that rifle?"

"Naw. I told you I wrote the store in Chicago that sold it. I said in my letter I was interested in a gun like that and wanted to examine one. They told me Henry Eldridge had bought the rifle and they guessed I could look at his. Wonder how in thunder Quirt figures on getting that torch over here?"

"Dunno," Lazy was thinking that it was going to take a lot of fire out of a red-headed girl when he found her dad was a

killer. "There's been a lot of sign language between Quirt and them hombres behind the barn."

"I think Quirt's going to let some of his men push a wagon close enough to throw that torch."

"Hm." The torch-bearer behind the knoll had gotten careless again and the blazing torch was sticking up in sight. Lazy framed the dancing flame in the notch of his rifle sight, squeezed the trigger.

The torch exploded in a shower of sparks and smaller flames. Yells of pain drifted to the two in the cornfield as the fiery shower sprayed down.

"Nice shooting!" Magurn yelled. "Nothing like shooting out the torch, 'cause we shore can't make another one." His laugh was sarcastic.

Lazy and Bull watched without comment as another small column of smoke began to drift upward. Magurn's jeering voice drifted to them, and the Cross Bar H boss lifted the flame high and invited them loudly to try their marksmanship.

"What's the matter, you two?" Quirt jeered, after a long moment had passed and there had been no shot. "Hand ain't getting shaky, is it?"

"Bring it a mite closer, Quirt," Lazy yelled to him.

"Closer, you say?" Quirt answered. "Hear that, boys? They want us to bring it closer." He cackled with glee. "Don't worry. We aim to oblige you, all right. We'll bring it closer. Hey! Bring that wagon over!"

"The tongue of that wagon is sticking out in plain sight," Lazy observed. "Somebody'll have to guide it till they get it turned around with the tongue in the back."

"Very interesting, boy," Bull rumbled, and slid his rifle to his armpit.

There was activity in the lean-to attached to the barn. They could catch a momentary glimpse of a foot of an arm as three or four men gathered around the wagon. Then cautiously, one man slid toward the tongue, stuck his arm out and jerked it back hastily.

But Lazy and Bull held their fire patiently. Again the arm appeared, stayed in sight for a moment. Becoming bolder, the man shoved his whole right shoulder in sight.

"Our powder's running low," Lazy observed. "One shot's enough."

Bull nodded. His rifle cracked once. As if jerked by an invisible hand, the man stumbled from behind the protection of the

wagon; another man grabbed him before he fell and dragged him back.

But the one shot drew plenty in return. The men with Magurn and the men behind the haystack started a withering fire in retaliation. Lazy and Bull hastily changed their position as bullets rattled through the cornstalks and kicked up dirt and dust around them. Lazy forgot the barn and the haystack, however, and watched Magurn's hiding-place like a hawk. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bull doing the same.

"No use kidding ourselves, though," Bull grunted. "Quirt's getting desperate to finish this fight off, but he ain't going to get foolish and show himself."

"Yeah," Lazy agreed drily. "We ain't stopping this business, just prolonging it—and that'll be fun while it lasts!" He threw a glance at the barn. "They've roped the wagon tongue now—going to turn it around that way!"

"I'd bet two to one I could cut that rope with a chunk of lead, but it wouldn't be worth wasting one on. You better start thinking."

"I am," Lazy answered tersely.

IN grim silence they watched the wagon roll out of the barn, turn half around, then rumble toward the knoll behind which Quirt hid. Rattling six-guns covered the slow journey of the wagon, and the two in the cornfield were busy changing their positions, as hot lead sought them out.

The wagon was passing a spot where it was nearest the farmhouse when the roar of a shotgun came from a window in the house. The tailboard of the wagon shattered and flew into a shower of splinters. The wagon stopped instantly.

"Magurn!" The voice came from the open window of the farmhouse. "Listen to what I got to say. I ain't got no personal interest in the fight, and I ain't taking no cards in it, understand? I'm in favor of liquidating Bull Jackson and that trouble-brewing partner of his, same as you—but you ain't burning my cornfield down to do it!"

Silence gripped the little farm.

"Did you see what I saw?" Bull demanded, incredulously. "That farmer is shooting a shotgun. At that range, by all laws of firearms, it shoulda just peppered

that wagon, but hell's fire—it tore the tail-gate plumb, clean—"

"Lordy, lordy!" Lazy breathed. "How dumb I am! Where's that scattergun of ours? Here, lemme have it—we'll tear that wagon to pieces in about five shots—the same as if we were shooting a cannon at it!"

Lazy was digging in his pockets for shot gun shells. He piled a dozen or so on the ground and fumbled with his pocketknife. Bull was watching with a perplexed expression.

"Here." Lazy passed over the sheath knife he'd taken from Tink Doss. "Ring 'em, Bull, ring 'em! See?" He was busy working on a shell, and he held it up for Bull to see. He made a slice completely around the paper shotgun shell, being sure that his incision was as near as possible to the wadding, on the inside of the shell, that separated the powder in the bottom end of the shell, from the buckshot in the front end. He continued to cut, until the shell was barely hanging together by a thin strip of paper.

He fixed another shell, slipped the two loads out of the shotgun and reloaded with his ringed shells. Moving down the cornfield a bit, he found a spot from which he got an unobstructed view of the wagon.

"I'll hit it square center," he flung over his shoulder, then took careful aim.

The roar was deafening as Lazy pulled both triggers. And the effect on the wagon was nothing short of miraculous. Lazy's aim had been good—both shells hit the wagon in the center. And they seemed to almost lift it off the ground. The air was filled with flying splinters, bits of boards, and other debris. When the dust settled, the wagon was a sorry sight. The heavy charge had almost broken its back; it sagged in the middle. And its middle, once the best spot for concealment, now offered scant protection for a single man.

"See how it works?" Lazy grinned. "By ringing the shell, the whole load of shot goes out together—doesn't scatter. I think I underestimated our little cannon—it ain't gonna take six shots. Two more's gonna make that wagon the most unsafe place in sight to hide behind. Got two finished? Gimme!"

"Quit shooting at that wagon!" It was the farmer, yelling from the house. "You

want to tear it to pieces? Quit shooting at it!"

"MAKE you a deal," Lazy yelled back. "Make that bunch get away from your wagon and we'll leave it be."

"Must think we're crazy!" a man behind the wagon yelled. "Minute we left this wagon you'd turn that shotgun on us!"

"Two more shots and that wagon'll be a heap on the ground," Lazy answered. "Then you'll be looking at this gun, anyhow. Better think it over. We'll let you get back to the barn."

"But you gotta drop all your guns first!" Bull butted in. "Step out in the open with your dukes up. Then turn around, unbuckle your belts and let 'em drop."

There was silence as the men behind the wagon considered this offer.

"You boys stay right where you are!" Quirt Magurn yelled. "Don't let 'em bluff you!"

Lazy lifted the scattergun till the wagon seat was framed over his sight. The gun's blast rippled the cornstalks for an area of twenty feet. The wagon seat jumped suddenly into the air, broke into half a dozen pieces which scattered themselves far and wide. The farmer yelled angrily, and then there was no sound for a long moment.

Three men edged slowly from behind the wagon, their hands lifted. They turned their backs to Lazy and Bull; their gunbelts sagged, then dropped to the ground, and the three hurried to the barn. Lazy grinned at the sound of Magurn's blistering profanity.

"Hey, Quirt!" It was the farmer again. "I think I got a way to get them two out of my cornfield 'thout ruining the corn—"

"Look!" Bull was pointing to two riders silhouetted on the horizon. "I'd know Langstrom as far as I could see that law-dog—girl musta met him before she got to Town."

"Let's go!" Lazy snapped, and they started wriggling toward the edge of the field. They were but a few feet from the edge when Lazy called a halt.

"We'll wait here. Can you run, you big tub of lard—?"

Quirt's men had seen the lawman and the girl, and they could hear Magurn's startled exclamations.

"—then, c'mon!"

They dashed into the open, Lazy's long

legs swinging slowly, but covering ground with amazing speed; Bull's thick, tree-trunk legs churning the air desperately as he lunged along trying to keep pace with Lazy.

They sprinted straight toward the barn, and they'd covered a good half of the distance before they were discovered. Quirt's yell preceded a rippling cross-fire from his knoll and the haystack; and bullets began to sing around them as they covered the last few remaining yards.

The three men behind the barn had seen them coming, but their guns were on the ground near the wagon, and they could do nothing. Neither Lazy nor Bull slowed up as they rounded a corner of the barn, but kept right on sprinting toward the horses tethered nearby.

They hit the saddles in a flying leap, and raked their spurs hard. Behind them was a confused jumble. Quirt was yelling to take out after them; a gun here and there banged at them, but the shooting was wild, and Sheriff Langstrom's voice was bellowing as he tried to restore order and exert his authority.

Bull pointed. "Almost straight ahead, halfway up the mountain."

Lazy threw a grim glance backwards. "Then feed that hoss some spur steel. This is one time when we've got less time than money!"

CHAPTER XI

Lazy Takes Bull Back

BUT the pursuit had a restraining hand this time, and was slow in getting started. They could see Magurn and Tabor arguing with Sheriff Langstrom, and once, three men started after them. Langstrom fired over their heads and the three turned back.

They had almost reached the foot of the mountains, where the floor of the valley broke like a wave against the steep hills, before any pursuit started. They rode up the sharp incline till they were well into the forest, then pulled to a stop. There was a pair of field glasses in the saddlebags of the horse Lazy rode. He turned them toward the distant farmhouse.

"Six of 'em," he reported lazily, "and not one of 'em Quirt Magurn nor Grant Tabor. Fact, these six don't seem in no big hurry—just moseying along."

"They figure we're shaking the dust of this Valley offa our boots, and fast," Bull rumbled. "Which figuring, believe me, boy, is hitting the nail right where a nail oughta be hit. Let's go!"

But Lazy had squirmed around to a comfortable position in the saddle and was still watching the six.

"You know Deck Lavell?"

"Know 'im when I see 'im," Bull grunted sourly. "I wouldn't brag about his acquaintance, even if I knew 'im better. Deck's ornery, even for Magurn's crowd."

Lazy passed the glasses over. "See if he's in that bunch."

"Who cares whether he is or not?" Bull grumbled, ignoring the glasses. "C'mon, let's ride. We got a trip to Hondro to make before we can start collecting that five thousand for nailing Henry Eldridge with this killing. Glad Eldridge stuck the reward money in the bank, and signed regular reward papers. That makes it legal, and the money is paid anyhow. A clever cover-up—"

"Point me out Deck Lavell, will you, before they get out of sight!"

The six were approaching a hill, and in a moment would be blotted from view. Bull sighed, took the glasses and studied the six.

"Third from the left, on a white-stockinged bay," he reported, passing the glasses back. Lazy took another look, but Lavell was slightly behind another rider, and before he could get a good look, they were behind the hill.

"C'mon, c'mon," Bull argued. "When they come in sight again they'll be right on us."

With Bull leading the way, they traveled a dim trail upward. Lazy kept a close watch on their back trail, in case their pursuers decided to put on more speed and overtake them.

Hence, they had already passed the trapper's cabin before Lazy saw it. He called Bull's attention to it.

"Course I know we passed it," the giant said peevishly. "Don't think I'm crazy enough to stop, do you? We can't get to Hondro fast enough, and you talk about getting in another fight like the cornfield picnic."

"You're leaving the Valley with a murder charge on that thick head of yours," Lazy argued back. "Deck Lavell's the man

that shot Joe Branch. And here comes Deck walking right into our hands."

"Yeah!" Bull retorted instantly. "Walking right into our hands—with his hands full of guns and five other men with him! You loco, Lazy? Suppose we did nab Lavell. How you going to make him talk?"

"There's ways," Lazy said darkly. "Bull, if you figured right, them six will go just as far as the cabin, and not finding us, will take it for granted we've vamoosed and turn back."

"And that's smart figuring—"

"We're already beyond the cabin. Hold up. We'll sit here for a spell. Maybe Deck'll stray from the fold and we can lay hands on him. He'd be a prize worth taking."

"Deck Lavell a prize!" Bull rumbled. "Even a family of skunks would disinherit that one." But the big man eased his blowing mount to a halt. They left the horses in a thick clump of pines, took their Winchesters and worked their way back down the steep mountainside.

FROM a pinnacle of rock they watched the six men as they toiled toward the cabin. The men were wary. From their high point, Lazy and Bull could see them as they approached within six-gun range of the shack. The six halted, dismounted and spread out. Guns ready, they closed in silently on the tumbledown hut.

"Where'd Lavell go?" Lazy nudged Bull. Bull wrinkled his nose in disgust and pointed. Lazy made out the figure of a man moving slowly through a thick tangle of underbrush.

"See? Just like I told you," Bull said in a low tone. "At the speed Deck's moving, he'll be the last one to git near that shack. He don't hanker for a fight that's anywhere near fair."

"He's our meat. Let's gather him in," Lazy drawled and slid off the rock.

Bull called on Heaven to witness what a fool he had for a partner, then followed. With infinite caution they worked their way downward through the brush, stopping often to spot the position of the six, and especially of their quarry.

They had little trouble keeping Deck in sight. That worthy had found a particularly thick clump of brush, and had burrowed into it deep. And from that spot he showed every intention of waiting for further developments.

"J'ever think," Bull whispered, "that the rest will think it durn awful funny that Deck ain't traveling back with 'em."

"Simple," Lazy answered. "We'll let Judge Colt gnaw on Deck's spinal column a minute, then Deck will sign out to the rest of them that maybe he'd better spend the night in the shack—just in case."

"It's your party," Bull said resignedly. "I only came for the refreshments. From behind that big pine—we'll have him—"

But before they could advance further, someone fired. The partners froze rigid, but there was no telltale zing of a close-flying bullet, and they squinted around. Another gun banged and they saw dust and splinters fly from the sagging door of the shack.

"Aw, hell, they're not in there," one of the men on the other side grunted. Another man, bolder than the rest, left his hiding place, and approached the cabin, guns slanted toward the sagging door.

"Nobody here," he reported.

"They kept on going, like we told Quirt they would," another put in.

"Yeah, they're halfway to Hondro by now."

Deck Lavell joined the discussion, and his voice sounded so close that the two partners jumped nervously at the sound of it.

"And me," Lavell grumbled, "I ain't chasing 'em no further. We've seen the last of them two. Let's go home."

In dejected silence, Lazy and Bull watched Lavell join the rest, and then all six catch up their horses and clatter down the mountain.

"And that," Bull said with finality, "settles that. Let's go, boy, before we start to take root."

Lazy leaned against a tree and rolled a smoke. Not till smoke was blowing through his nostrils, did he look at his huge friend, and when he did, his face was innocent and guileless.

"I'll flip you to see who goes after the horses, and who cooks supper," he drawled. "Soon's it gets dark, we're riding back to Town."

Bull sat down on a rock and cursed earnestly in a low tone. Without mentioning any name whatever, he gave a vivid description of the dumbness of a certain lazy-looking individual who bleated on a harmonica. Lazy listened attentively, and when Bull's breath ran low, he cut in with a drawl.

"DECK LAVELL killed Joe Branch, of that I'm certain," Lazy reasoned. "But why? Well, now let's figure it out. You were telling Joe Branch what your evidence was—that Henry Eldridge, Joe's boss, did the killing. Now what would Joe have done as soon as he learned about your evidence? Answer—he'd gone straight and told his boss."

"You're doing the talking, and it ain't making sense," Bull said. "But go on, I like your voice—reminds me of a jackass my uncle—"

"Of course it don't make sense," Lazy agreed. "That's why we got to make Lavell talk. His answer will be the answer to the whole riddle."

"What riddle?" Bull fairly roared. "That ain't no damn riddle! Henry Eldridge owns a high-powered rifle. Hawkins was killed with it. And to keep suspicion off himself, Eldridge offers a reward for the killer."

"Henry Eldridge must know he owns the only high-powered rifle in the Valley," Lazy said. "He wouldn't throw suspicion on himself by using that rifle. And another thing—I think the man who killed Hawkins couldn't get close to Hawkins. The killer knew Hawkins would start shooting at him on sight—so this killer stayed a long way off—and used a high-powered gun."

"Yeah," Bull agreed, "I'm beginning to catch on, now."

"The real killers got scared that you were uncovering something—so they framed a killing on you. And Deck is the hombre that knows all about the frame-up. That's why we got to go back to town."

"Even if you get Deck, you can't make him talk," Bull argued. "Listen, you lazy sonuvagun, I know you want to stick your own neck in a noose to help me, but it's no go. It wouldn't do no good to go back."

"Quirt's got you framed dead to rights," Lazy went on. "And Quirt won't take chances of doing a job that the law will do for him. Why should he? He wants you out of the way, and if he plays it right, the law will put you out of the way for him. So you can bet your bottom dollar he's sent word to Hondro for the law to look out for you."

"What's the difference between bucking the law in Hondro, and bucking the law and Magurn's mob in Town?" Bull wanted to know.

"Simply this. They'll be expecting you in Hondro—and they won't in Town. We'll walk in on 'em and catch the whole crew flatfooted. Then we can get our business tended to before the news gets spread that we're back."

"How you going to make Deck Lavell talk?"

"We'll promise him a lollypop," Lazy said.

Bull sighed. "As usual you win," he grunted.

"I'll flip you to see who goes after the horses," Lazy offered.

"What chance have I got against that two-headed nickel you got?" Bull complained. "I'll go get 'em."

"And I," Lazy drawled, "will serenade you on your trip." He pulled out the battered harmonica and beat it against his palm.

"There's some things," Bull said, "that I will not stand for—I'll just take that tin package of groans with me!"

He flicked the instrument from Lazy's fingers, and strode up the mountain, humming softly to himself.

CHAPTER XII

We're Going to See the Sheriff

THEY had a meager meal of some bacon and beans that had been in the saddlebags of one of the horses, then put out their fire and smoked, waiting for full darkness before starting to Town.

"If I had my mouth organ," Lazy suggested, "I'd play us a tune."

"Yeah, I know. That's why you ain't getting it," Bull replied contentedly.

"Wouldn't go shooting off my lip too much, Mister Francis Periwinkle Jackson," Lazy reminded him. "I might collect that bust in the nose you owe me."

But instead of rising to the bait, Bull wriggled nervously and kept darting glances around.

"I don't like this sitting around like a bump on a log," Bull grumbled. "I got me a feeling all ain't well."

"Just your conscience bothering you for stealing my mouth organ," Lazy chided, and then sat up straight, eyes focusing on the skyline of the mountain. A dark blob was silhouetted against the pale blue of the

sky. Wordlessly, he pointed it out to Bull, and as they watched, another shape and still one more, moved slowly across the skyline, and was swallowed up by the deep shadows of the pines.

"Quirt Magurn didn't give up so easy, after all," Bull grunted.

"Yeah," Lazy agreed. "The smell of our fire is still in the air, and it'll lead them thisaway. Better get the horses and get away from this spot."

"They'd been sitting on a rude bench on the outside of the trapper's cabin. The horses were hobbled in a clearing a hundred yards or so distant. They had covered only half the distance when there was a loud crashing of brush on the mountainside above them.

"Lordie!" Bull breathed. "Sounds like a army!"

"That's not Quirt's men," Lazy reasoned. "They wouldn't be making that much noise."

They reached the horses, hastily took the hobbles off and tightened their cinches. But before they could mount, the brush crashed again, this time only a short distance from the cabin. Lazy's horse tossed its head up, but before it could whinny, the lanky one's fingers clamped over its nose. Bull's big paw was effectively muzzling his mount.

"Smell that smoke? Somebody's had a fire in that cabin, and not long ago either!"

Bull leaned close to Lazy's ear. "Ab Nason's voice. The fat's in the fire now, and stewing good! Both packs are baying after us now."

A match flared brightly down at the cabin. Lazy and Bull beat a hasty retreat further into the thick screen of pines. By the flickering light of the match they watched the four men around the cabin for signs.

"Here's a stamped out cigarette butt," a searcher said loudly. "Hey! It's still warm—!"

The match went out abruptly, and the loud talk died instantly. The two watchers in the pines could hear a war council being held in low tones. It sounded as if two of the men were in favor of leaving the spot quickly, but Ab Nason wanted to beat the brush around the cabin and flush out their quarry.

"Ab's got more guts than he's got brains," Bull whispered. "He might talk 'em into hunting for us—in which case, somebody's going to get hurt needlessly."

But evidently the majority ruled, for the four caught up their horses and mounted. The two could hear them crashing their way through the woods all the way down the mountain.

"S'funny," Bull said thoughtfully. "This Ab Nason, who owns a little farm over near the Eagle Track, and a big guy named Dutcher—Jake Dutcher—are the two hombres that are keeping the farmers and small ranchers stirred up. Both of them are hot-headed."

LAZY remembered the big man who had accosted him in the saloon on his arrival in Town. He described him to Bull.

"That's Jake Dutcher all right. Him and Ab, like I said, are the hot-headed ones in the other camp. Jake shot one of Magurn's men through the leg with a rifle once. Seems like the fellow got a skinful and on his way home lassoed one of Jake's pigs—broke its leg."

"Sounds interesting," Lazy agreed. "One of them may've shot Hawkins—maybe Jake, since he sounds like he's free and easy with a rifle. It'll be worth looking into. But we're wasting time now. It's dark. Let's move."

Much more quietly than Ab and his bunch had moved, they traveled slowly down the mountain.

"I saw a trail this afternoon, further down the mountain," Lazy said. "Maybe we'd better stay on the mountain side for a while, and give that farm with the cornfield a wide berth."

"That won't be necessary."

The two whirled at the sound of the voice, hands leaping for their Colts.

"Raise your hands!" Ab Nason sounded a little scared, but grimly determined. "No tricks, or I'll shoot you both! That's better. Now get in front of me, and no tricks, mind you. I've got a rifle."

"Pretty slick, Ab," Lazy purred softly. "Send the rest of your men clattering down the side of the mountain, while you waited around."

"I thought so," Ab snickered. "Slick enough trick to catch both you skunks flat-footed, and even if I hadn't caught you, there's more men waiting at the base of the mountain."

"What's on the program?" Bull asked jovially.

"You should ask," Ab retorted, instantly suspicious of the big man's apparent un-

concern. "There's still a murder charge waiting for you back in town. There's an open glade a little ahead. Stop when we get to it."

The moon had come up, and its silver light was bright enough to see by. When they reached the glade, Lazy and Bull stopped. They heard Ab slide to the ground and walk close.

"Get down," he ordered. "Then turn your back to me and unbuckle your guns. And when you get through that, each one of you step over close to me—one at a time—so's I can feel around for hideouts."

"Ab's getting smart," Lazy drawled.

"Smarter'n I was in the Notch the other morning!" Nason retorted. "All right, you first, Ladigan. Keep your hands in the air!" Ab did a thorough job of searching Lazy for any weapon, starting at his boots and working upward, even taking the tall rider's hat off and shaking it.

"You seem all-fired anxious to get Bull and me behind bars, Ab," Lazy said pleasantly. "Some of the facts in this here killing must have been coming too close to home."

"Just doing my duty," Nason snapped back. "And I don't give a hoot what you find out about Hawkins' murder."

Lazy was looking intently at the farmer in the pale light of the moon. His lips twisted sardonically.

"Not even if Bull and I found out that you own a high-powered rifle?"

Nason jerked rigid. "That's a lie!" His voice was husky. "Jake's half-owner—" He stopped, realizing that he had said too much. Lazy's slow chuckle drifted through the darkness.

"Them high-powered rifles cost a lot," he murmured, "so you and Jake bought one together 'cause they're such swell deer guns."

AB WAS standing only a few feet from Lazy, feet planted wide apart, a cocked pistol in his hand. His breath was heavy and raspy. A few feet away, Bull shifted his position and strolled forward.

"Stay where you are, Jackson!" Lazy caught the note of terror in Nason's voice, and frowned. A man crazed with fear—with a gun in his hand—he could think of many things more pleasant.

"What's all the excitement for?" Bull complained. "Can't see nothing to get ex-

cited about, just because we know you own a high-powered rifle."

"Don't try to kid me!" Nason's chest was heaving with his labored breathing. He licked his lips, and his thumb kept playing nervously with the hammer of his Colt. "I know Bull Jackson found out that Hawkins was killed with a high-powered rifle. But I didn't do it!"

"Then what're you worrying about?" Lazy asked. Nason's voice, screechy with terror, sent cold chills down his spine.

"Hawkins needed killing," Nason went on. "He brought Quirt Magurn into this valley and hired a lot of gunmen—paid 'em to deliberately ruin crops and kill stock that belonged to us farmers—we never could catch 'em, but we know Hawkins was back of it all. But I didn't kill him, and I'm not letting Quirt Magurn brand his murder on me!"

Again silence fell on the little glade. Lazy watched Nason—could almost read his thoughts. His wild guess about Ab's high-powered rifle had produced results he hadn't expected, and he knew what Ab was thinking—that he couldn't afford to let these two reach Town alive. This was a situation he'd never bucked before. Lazy had faced many guns, but usually it was an even match, his gun against his adversary's. But this—the man was steeling himself to fire the first shot.

"Seeing what's on your mind, Ab," Lazy said softly. "Mind if I smoke?"

Nason nodded, still more intent on the struggle that was going on within him than he was his captives. Lazy's long fingers worked swiftly; he jerked out papers and tobacco sack; racing to finish his smoke before Ab made up his mind.

Swiftly he poured the brown flakes in his paper. His fingers were suddenly all thumbs; he fumbled in his pocket for a match. It flared into light under his rasping thumbnail—and he shoved the sputtering, glittering stick straight at Ab's face—saw the farmer blink blindly in the sudden glare—then blew a palm full of tobacco into Nason's eyes.

Bull lunged ahead like a striking grizzly; his huge fist rocked back then smacked solidly against Nason's jaw. Ab groaned and sagged, and would have fallen had not Bull slipped his hands under his armpits and lowered him gently to the ground.

"For a minute," Bull breathed softly,

"this clodhopper had me worrying, and how!"

"You and me both," Lazy agreed fervently. "Me, I'd rather tackle two reg'lar gunslingers any day, than one dirt farmer with murder on his mind." He was thoughtful a moment. "Still, if Ab had been familiar with guns, he'd of never let me struck that match, and blinded him like that."

"There's an old saying that a shoemaker should stick to his shoes to the last, or something, and the same applies to farmers. As a potato planter he might be a champion, but as a gunfighter," Bull sighed, "he's learning the tricks of the trade the hard way."

"Tie him on his horse," Lazy said. "We'll hang onto him—he might come in handy later on."

"Handy!" Bull rumbled disgustedly. "Handy! Why you half-asleep idiot—he's got a high-powered rifle and he was scared purple when we found it out. That's proof enough for me!"

"Mebbe," Lazy answered. "But if Ab killed Hawkins, ten to one he would have admitted it to us—'cause he sure as hell was going to kill us! But instead, he kept saying he didn't kill him."

Bull grunted disgustedly, and Lazy went on. "I'm not saying we haven't made progress tonight—we have. But we got plenty of work still to do before the sun comes up. So bring Ab along and let's ride—for a social visit to the sheriff of Town!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Talk With the Sheriff

"**R**ECOLLECT AB saying something about some of his men waiting at the foot of the mountain?" Bull warned.

"Uh-huh," Lazy muttered sourly. "If we blunder into that crowd and there's any shooting, this whole blamed valley will be seething again. And me, I've had about enough excitement for one day."

"Same here," Bull agreed, "specially since my beauty sleep was disturbed early this morning."

"And the last place either bunch would look for us would be the cabin, both sides having searched it," Lazy mused. "C'mon,

we'll back-track and catch some sleep. Tomorrow we can watch the valley with those glasses, and if things look quiet enough all day, we'll mosey down."

They heaved Ab on his horse and tied him securely. As a precautionary measure they slipped a gag in his mouth, then with Lazy leading the way, back-trailed to the cabin.

After a while Ab woke up—and as soon as his head cleared he began to wriggle energetically in his bonds, but he subsided promptly when Bull wagged a Colt muzzle under his nose and spoke to him reprovingly. The night passed peacefully enough, and even though they took turns standing guard, in case any of Ab's friends got curious and started looking for him, they were not bothered.

"Them friends at the foot of the mountain he talked about mighta just been a bluff," Bull suggested.

In the morning they made a fire out of dry wood so as not to cause smoke, and cooked enough food—found in the saddlebags of one of the mounts—to last them the rest of the day.

They whiled the daylight hours away loafing, smoking and trying to get Ab to talk. But the farmer was surly and refused to enlarge on anything he had said the night before. Three or four times during the day Lazy climbed a nearby knoll and studied the valley through the field glasses.

"Looks as peaceful as a Sunday School picnic," he reported. "Come sundown, we'll mosey into Town quiet and unassuming like. I got me a hunch nobody'll be expecting us a'tall."

The little cow village looked peaceful enough, but the two partners were wary. They approached the outskirts with slow caution, retreating at every movement, and investigating every shadow.

Near the edge of Town, almost directly behind the livery stable, was a row of old shacks; evidently the original, and now tumbledown portion of Town. Leaving Bull with Ab, Lazy investigated the shacks, till he found one to his liking.

"C'mon, Ab," Lazy said pleasantly, untying the rope that held the farmer in the saddle, "this here is your castle till we find you a better place. Cut out that kicking, now, or I'll let Bull give you a bear hug!"

But Ab continued to kick and they

grabbed him roughly and hauled him into the shack and dumped him in one corner.

Outside, Bull hesitated as he shoved a giant boot toe into his stirrup.

"It ain't that I'm going against your judgment, Lazy," he muttered seriously, "but you are still sure going back to Town is the best thing—after all, that sheriff might be unreasonable."

"That'll be his tough luck," Lazy answered, and there was no drawl in his voice. You're not going back in the jug—if that's what's eating that thick hide of yours."

"It ain't," Bull grunted. "I ain't worried about no murder charge—what was worrying me is that we got to get Langstrom's cooperation to get anywhere."

"We'll get it," Lazy said shortly. "Better leave the horses here."

THEY were in Town, but down the street from those stores and saloons that stayed open late and kept their lights burning. The street down here was dark and there was no one near. Lazy leading, they turned off into an alley and left their mounts groundhitched just off the street.

There was a light burning in Sheriff Langstrom's office, but to reach it, they had to pass two stores that were still open, and the lights from their windows splashed across the board sidewalk. Bull fidgeted nervously as Lazy moved steadily ahead, for well Bull knew that both he and Lazy were built to stand out in any crowd.

Even strolling along in his everlasting lazy slouch, Ladigan still looked down on most tall men. Not only that, but Lazy walked in a peculiar manner. It appeared slow, but in reality it was not. He lifted one leg from the ground, swung his foot forward slightly, and then his natural laziness seemed to overtake him and he was undecided whether to shove the foot forward, or just let it sag back to the ground. But for all his apparent shiftlessness, there was a suggestion of unleashed power, of blinding speed in his slouch. It was a walk that, once seen, was never forgotten.

And Bull was also aware of his own physical appearance. Only a fraction of an inch shorter than Lazy, he was tremendously broad. His huge legs moved like giant trees in a howling wind when he walked, and starting at his waist, his body began to spread out in all directions. His chest was thick, and rounded like the outside

of a barrel. His huge shoulders swung with aggressive rhythm as he walked, and his mighty arms could crush an ordinary man.

It was small wonder that Bull was apprehensive of reaching the lawman's office unseen. An ordinary man could have pulled his hat brim low and passed in most any crowd—but neither of these were ordinary men.

But Lazy picked an opportune time to pass a store. He waited until a customer entered, then stepped hastily past, figuring, and rightly, that the attention of those in the store would be centered on the newly arrived customer. And having passed the first store, he stepped boldly past the second, and reached the sheriff's office. But there they stopped.

Tink Doss and Sheriff Langstrom were both in the office.

"Our little scheme is sunk before it gets started if Tink Doss gets wind of it—him being on Magurn's payroll," Lazy mused, standing a safe distance from the window. Tink was seated so that he would be the first to see anyone entering the door, but his back was to the other window in the office.

"Tink looks pretty sleepy," Bull said hopefully. "Maybe he'll go home to bed pretty soon."

"Reckon it's worth waiting for a little while, anyhow," Lazy muttered. "We'll stand here in the shadows quietlike."

But they had been there only a few minutes when a gun banged up the street.

"That's luck!" Bull said. "Maybe the sheriff will send Tink to investigate!"

"And maybe," Lazy cursed silently, "the sheriff will go himself. Look! What'd I tell you?"

At the sound of the shot, Sheriff Langstrom got to his feet nervously, peered out the window, then jerked the door open. The two partners shrank deeper in the shadows as the lawman clumped past. They waited until his footsteps had died away, then Lazy touched Bull's arm.

"Bull," Lazy said, "go 'round to that other window, rattle on the pane with your knuckles, and when Tink turns around—make a face at him."

Bull nodded. There was complete agreement between these two, and neither ever questioned an order given by the other. As Bull moved off, Lazy slid close to the office door.

He heard Bull rattle on the window pane; heard a chair scrape in the office as the lawman turned, then flung the door wide.

Tink Doss was coming to his feet, clawing for his gun at the sight of Bull. Lazy raised his clubbed six-gun, brought it down swiftly and neatly across the deputy's head. Bull stepped quietly inside.

"We better hurry," Lazy said tensely. "There wasn't no more racket up the street—probably just some puncher burning a little powder—sheriff'll be back any minute. Here—you take Tink out behind the jail and tie him up good."

BULL nodded, scooped the unconscious deputy into his arms and faded outside. Lazy pulled the frayed blinds down, and seated himself comfortably in the sheriff's chair, feet propped on the desk. Swiftly, he reviewed in his mind the plan he had to clear Bull of the murder charge. He'd need the sheriff's cooperation and it would be a good test to find out just where the lawman did stand.

Presently he heard the lawman's heavy tread moving toward the office, and not knowing just what kind of a reception he'd get, Lazy slipped his gun out, and held it concealed below the top of the desk, as the lawman stepped inside.

"Ladi—" Langstrom's breath whistled sharply, his hand made a darting movement toward his gun—stopped suddenly as Lazy let his own gun slide into view. His eyes darted around the office. "Where's Tink?"

"He left just as I came in," Lazy explained.

The sheriff cursed in an undertone, muttering something about his deputy never being around when a body needed him. "What brings you back to Town, Ladigan?" he asked sharply. "And where's that big partner of yours?"

"First," Lazy said conversationally, "let's talk about what brought me back to Town. Quirt Magurn's been running things with a high hand 'round here, hasn't he?" he asked swiftly.

The lawman's eyes grew smoky with anger. "Too danged high," he muttered savagely. "But what's that got to do with—?"

Lazy leaned across the desk. "How'd you like to break Quirt's power—break that stranglehold he's got on this valley?"

The sheriff sat up straighter. "How? Do you know something, Ladigan? If you do, by hell, I'm not going to stand for you buttoning your lip like Jackson did. I'll make you spit it out—"

"Don't exactly know anything," Lazy went on, "just a little trick I had planned—"

"How would that break Magurn?" Langstrom asked impatiently. "Not that I'm getting mixed up in anything crooked, you understand—but then, Quirt's been pulling some raw deals, and—what's on your mind, Ladigan?"

Lazy let his gun bob into sight again. "Lay your guns on the desk, Sheriff, and then we'll talk more freely."

Langstrom's face reddened. "That means your partner's around close," he growled. He took a long look at the muzzle of Lazy's gun, peeping at him over the desk top, sighed disgustedly and laid his Colts on the desk.

Bull stuck his head through the door. "Hi, Sheriff," he greeted jovially, as he entered and lowered his bulk into a chair.

"Just to keep you from getting notions about re-arresting Bull, here," Lazy grinned, and slipped the lawman's guns into a drawer.

"Fat chance I'da had," the lawman grunted, still eyeing Lazy's gun, "even," he added dubiously, "if I had wanted to."

"HUH?" It was Bull's surprised grunt.

"Magurn was too darn anxious to see you dead, Jackson," the lawman went on. "Looks to me like he wants you shut up for some reason. And knowing Quirt Magurn—that's reason enough for me to want to keep you alive!"

"And I think I know the reason," Lazy chuckled. "Now listen, here's the play. The man who actually killed Joe Branch is Deck Lavell, and I think I can make Deck admit it. If I can, it won't set well with the Eagle Track crew, and Grant Tabor and his men will keep Magurn from getting Deck out of jail. In other words, the Eagle Track will back you in breaking Quirt Magurn's power!"

"Sounds simple enough," Langstrom admitted. "In fact, it would work out swell—if you had anything to arrest Deck on.

"Where's your proof he killed Joe Branch?"

"Leave that to me," Lazy grinned confidently. "I think I can make Deck talk—and that ain't all—while me'n Bull here have been running from Magrun's lead—we uncovered a plenty important clue in this case—mind you, I won't say it'll solve this murder—but I got a hunch it'll start tongues wagging—and we'll find out something!"

"Well, let's have it!" Langstrom said impatiently.

"Later," Lazy said. "Right now we've got to figure some way of getting Deck Lavell away from the Cross Bar H where we can get our hands on him."

"Ain't no need of that," Langstrom said. "Deck's in Town—over at the Silver Spangle filling his gut with whiskey. I'll go over and fetch him."

"Nope," Lazy said. "I'll have to do the fetching, if my little plan to make him talk is going to work. Who's that?"

He cocked an ear to listen at the pounding of a hard running horse's hoofs in the street outside. Bull pulled the shade back a little and looked out.

"Just some likkered-up cow nurse wearing out a good horse," he muttered, then let the shade fall as footsteps pounded on the walk outside. Two men were strolling up the street. Their voices drifted into the office.

"Never in my life saw Ab Nason ride so durn fast," one of them remarked.

"Yeah," the other replied, "didn't think that farmer could stay on a horse going that fast—went through Town like the devil was on his tail—"

"Hear that?" Bull snapped.

"Yeah, and I'm way ahead of you—" Lazy snapped, heading for the door. Throwing caution to the wind, they piled out into the street, leaving the sheriff sputtering questions, and raced for their ground-hitched mounts. Luckily, the streets were emptying fast, and their passage went unnoticed, as they hit leather and took out after Ab.

"One of us better head for Jake Dutcher's, the other for Ab's place," Lazy said, "they're partners in that rifle—and if we don't get there in time—that rifle ain't going to be in existence long!"

"There's a fork just ahead," Bull yelled back. "Take the left trail to Dutcher's—I'll take the right to Ab's—and good luck!"

CHAPTER XIV

A Daring Plan

EVEN though, in his own mind, Lazy was almost positive that the rifle owned jointly by Jake Dutcher and Ab Nason was not the one that killed Hawkins, nevertheless he was too old in this game to overlook any bets. There was plenty of evidence that pointed both ways.

There was no doubt in Lazy's mind but that Ab Nason had intended to kill both him and Bull back there on the mountain. And knowing that dead men tell no tales, if Nason had killed Hawkins, there was a strong chance that he wouldn't have been scared to admit it then.

On the other hand, he reasoned, as his mount drummed steadily through the night, Ab was mighty rattled at the mention of the rifle, and if there had been no dirty work done with it, then what caused Nason's fear?

Could the rifle actually be the one that did the killing? Perhaps. And it was likely that the gun could have been used by the murderer, and the murderer not be either Ab Nason or Dutcher; in which case, one or both of the co-owners might know who the killer was. In any event, it was worth a try to stop Nason.

"Questions," Lazy sighed into the night wind, "are like bridges, best not to cross 'em till you come to 'em."

"After a short, swift ride through the night, he saw lights ahead, and from Bull's meager description, knew he must be approaching Dutcher's place. He well knew that he was at a disadvantage, since he had no idea of the layout he was approaching, and he thought of leaving his horse and advancing on foot. But he discarded the idea.

"That's what Ab and Jake would expect—while if I just galloped up, they might figure I was a friend."

The lights ahead grew bigger and he could make out the dim outline of a small one-story house, a fair-sized barn and what looked like a toolshed. And, in addition to the lamplight from the toolshed, there was a dull red glow coming from that building. Lazy rode straight for it.

As the sound of his horse reached Dutcher's place, Lazy saw two men step into the lighted doorway of the toolshed and peer into the darkness toward him. The lanky

one grinned—sure enough, they were taking him for a friend. He rode on bodily, still wondering about the dull red glow.

"Hey, Anse, that you?" Dutcher yelled. Lazy rode on.

"Lige, if that's you, speak up!" Nason's voice was urgent. "Say, some—look out, Jake! It's Ladigan!"

The two sprang back inside the building, Dutcher sending a six-gun slug crashing at Lazy as he retreated.

Lazy slid off his mount on the run and raced toward the building, thumping two shots into the heavy door of the shed. Jake Dutcher stepped into sight, whipped a fast shot at Lazy and jumped back. Lazy was within thirty feet of the shed now, and he could see what caused the red glow.

The shed was a combination toolshed and blacksmith shop. A forge was glowing bright red just inside the door. Lazy took a cautious step forward, and a red tongue of flame leaped at him through a knothole in the shed. The lanky one retreated into a deep shadow and crouched, waiting.

Suddenly Jake Dutcher's arm shot into view, holding a rifle!

The big farmer dropped the rifle square into the red hot coals of the forge, and withdrew his arm as Lazy's slug tore at his sleeve.

Ab Nason blasted through the knothole at Lazy's gunflash, but the bullet only knocked up dust where Lazy had been.

With a long iron hook, Jake Dutcher, protected by the shed door, was frantically turning the bellows of the forge. Nason's triumphant laugh floated to Lazy as the rifle stock caught fire, and the gun barrel began to glow red under the heat.

"Why don't you step up and get your evidence, Ladigan?" Nason taunted. "There it is, just waiting for you as purty as you please." He waited a moment; then went on. "Why don't you say something, Ladigan? This is the spot for one of your bright remarks."

But Lazy, knowing that Ab's gun would follow the sound of his voice, wisely kept silent. But only for a moment, as a grin creased his features.

"Hate to see a good gun ruined—reckon I'd better take that rifle," he drawled, then jumped aside. Nason cursed and his gun spat through the knothole. Lazy grinned, faded way back, then hurried to his horse.

Ab was still making plenty of noise with his cursing and shooting.

Lazy slipped the lasso rope from the saddle, and stepping wide to miss Ab's wild shooting, approached the shed. He shook the rope out in a small loop, twirled it for a long throw, then let it sail out. The loop dropped over the rifle barrel.

Ab squawled a warning and Jake Dutcher snagged the rope with his iron hook. Lazy pulled—but Dutcher held the rope against the fiery blaze till it parted.

"Try something else, Ladigan!" Nason shouted gleefully.

"I will," Lazy, promised in a whisper, as he heard an approaching horse. He faded back again and hurried to meet the oncoming rider. As he'd expected, it was Bull. Quickly he outlined the situation and gave his orders.

"Nothing to do but use Colt persuasion in getting the rifle," he muttered. "Mosey 'round to the other side and start squirting lead through that window. I'll prance right up to the front door and snag the weapon itself."

BULL grunted and moved off. In a moment his Colt was splitting the night echoes with its roaring song, and bullets were thudding close to the two inside. Lazy advanced.

And then, unmindful of the bullets that Lazy could have put into him, Jake Dutcher sprang into view, caught the heavy shed door and slammed it shut. Lazy raced forward and hurled himself at the door, but Dutcher had thrown the bolt. Ab was firing alternately at Lazy and at Bull through the window, as the heavy-ringing blows of a hammer began to sound.

Bull's gun stopped, and the giant loomed up around the shed.

"Guess that settles it," he grunted. "Ab's covering the window—and that damn farmer can shoot!—and 'fore we could break the door down, Dutcher'd have that rifle hammered into a wagon tire."

"Yeah, you're right," Lazy answered, then lifted his voice. "You win, Ab, this time—but there's still cards in this deck that ain't been dealt yet!"

Ab yelled derisively, and his wild, wrathful shooting followed them as they hurried back to their horses.

"For the time being," Lazy said as they galloped back to town, "we'll just let Ab

and Jake ride and say nothing about them to Sheriff Langstrom. The main thing right now is to get hold of Deck Lavell."

"It ain't worth the trouble now," Bull said. "You heard Langstrom say he wasn't too strong on re-arresting me—cause he figured Magurn was too anxious to get me out of the way."

"That's just it," Lazy said. "Deck's our trump card—if we play him right. Once Deck admits he killed an Eagle Track man—right then the Eagle Track gets sore at Quirt Magurn, and Quirt'll have a full-sized war on his hands. The sheriff will back the Eagle Track in breaking Magurn's power, and then we'll be free to go ahead and find the killer."

"We done found two killers," Bull snapped. "How many more you want? Eldridge owns a high-powered rifle, and Nason and Dutcher owned one—or did. One of them is bound to be a bushwhacker."

"When you found out Eldridge owned a high-powered rifle," Lazy drawled back, "you quit looking for any more—and then another one turned up—what's to keep another one—or two or three more, from turning up—once the Eagle Track and Magurn get to scrapping?"

Bull had no argument against that logic and the rest of the ride to Town was in silence.

Only two lights still burned as they swept down Main Street; one in the Silver Spangle, and the other in the sheriff's office. The old lawman was still waiting for them, and he started spouting questions the minute they entered.

"We thought one of Magurn's men was listening to us," Lazy lied glibly, "and we took out after him, but it was only Ab Nason—and I know darn well he's not telling Quirt anything. Now, let's go over and get Deck Lavell."

"Deck's gone," Langstrom grunted sourly. "Rode out of Town about half a hour ago with three other Cross Bar H punchers. Playing your hunch, I tried to keep on buying him liquor till you got back, but it didn't work—he's too scared of Quirt to get too drunk."

Lazy sat down and took his time rolling a smoke while he digested this bit of news. When he had his quirky burning good, he looked up lazily.

"One thing's certain. If we're going to make this play, we got to do it tonight—

we can't keep Tink Doss tied up in there forever—and by morning the news will be 'round that Bull's back in town. That means the Eagle Track and Magurn will start yelling that you arrest him again. Nope, we got to strike tonight!"

"I'll string with you," Langstrom said. "Understand, I ain't doing it 'cause I love either one of you—but that lynching bee this morning was raw stuff and the quicker I pull Quirt Magurn's fangs—the quicker things 'round here'll straighten out—he's getting too big for his britches."

The lawman stood up, stretched and reached for his hat. "I'm going to miss a lot of sleep, riding all the way to the Cross Bar H and back, but—"

"You ain't going," Lazy said pleasantly. "Me'n Bull will pay Quirt a visit to-night, and bring Deck back with us."

"You're crazy! Crazy as a bedbug!" Langstrom yelled. "Why, Quirt's got twenty-thirty men out there—all of 'em gun-handly, too!"

"You're telling me he's crazy!" Bull broke in. "How you figure to do it?" he asked sarcastically. "Tiptoe into the bunkhouse, tap Deck on the shoulder and tell him to come on?"

"We-e-el," Lazy drawled, "something like that."

"Is he always like that?" Langstrom asked Bull. "Crazy, I mean."

"Never mind that kind of talk," Lazy cut in. "I'm young, and I'm purty—the gals tell me. I want to keep on living, and I don't want my purtiness smeared up with lead—so I ain't going to try nothing rash—"

"Rash, he says!" Bull's disgust was only too evident.

"Sheriff," Lazy went on unheedingly, "you draw me a map of how the buildings at the Cross Bar H lay, and loan me four extra guns and some twine—and we'll bring Deck Lavell back and nobody'll be any worse off—except Quirt Magurn will lose some badly needed beauty sleep."

CHAPTER XV

And Bull Is Freed

THEY were a good mile from the Cross Bar H, crouched in a dry creek bed. Lazy blew out the match by which they'd been studying the sheriff's crudely drawn map.

"Got it all straight, now?" Lazy asked. Bull chuckled gleefully. "Yeah, but I wish you'd tell it to me again just for the enjoyment it gives me."

"Wish I had time to," Lazy chuckled, "but the night is wearing thin. Let's go."

They both had their own horses back now, Lazy riding Sloppy, and Bull astride a huge bay whose name couldn't be mentioned in polite company. Wasting no more time, they pushed on toward the Cross Bar H, and guided by the sheriff's map, approached to a spot within fifty yards of the bunkhouse. They left their horses behind a wagon shed and there they separated.

Lazy took two of the extra guns the sheriff had loaned them and headed for a small springhouse which was situated about halfway between the bunkhouse and the main ranchhouse. Crouching behind this small shed, he tied down the hammers of the two extra guns. He opened the door of the springhouse and stuck the two guns in the crack of the door, and tied them securely to the door hinges.

The good stout twine he tied to the gnarled knob of each gun hammer, one piece of string to each hammer. Trailing string, he moved back from the springhouse and made his way to the barn. The barn was to one side, and slightly to the rear of the big bunkhouse.

He waited a few minutes and Bull crept up, also trailing string.

"Got 'em tied to the corral bars," Bull reported in a whisper. "Sorta pointing toward the bunkhouse, so's their flash can be seen, but pointed up so's they won't hit nothing."

"Let's see, now," Lazy mused. "Sheriff said Quirt sleeps in the ranchhouse now—just like he owned the place, and that corner upstairs room is his. Here, take these strings, while I very rudely wake up Mr. Quirt Magurn."

As silent as a wraith, Lazy moved off. Only a few yards from the house, he raised his gun and took aim at the window pane, glinting palely in the light of a dying moon.

The sudden blast of his gun sent rolling echoes across the Cross Bar H. One, two, three shots he sent crashing through the window, and he could imagine the havoc those shots were making as they crashed into the walls of Quirt Magurn's room.

Three shots into Quirt's room, then he

whirled and emptied his gun through the window of the bunkhouse. Window glass was tinkling as the echoes of his firing died away. For a moment, silence, then bedlam.

Curses, shouts, yells, from the bunkhouse, then the thump of boots, and a door flung open.

Behind the barn, Bull pulled a string. A gun crashed over by the corral. The door slammed shut and there was more cursing. Lazy had reached a corner of the big front porch of the ranchhouse. Bull pulled another string, and one of Lazy's guns at the springhouse spat.

That shot brought an answering volley from the bunkhouse, as a couple of guns spurted through the smashed window. Lazy grabbed his nose!

"File outta that bunkhouse, and bring your guns, you scum!"

All the way out to the Cross Bar H, Lazy had practiced that flat, monotone voice of Quirt Magurn, and he'd found he could make a pretty good imitation of it by holding his nose—good enough to pass in a lot of excitement. He clamped his nostrils again, as Bull pulled more strings and guns barked from the corral and the springhouse.

"It's Ab Nason and his gang!" Lazy twanged. "Now's our chance to get 'em! Pile outta that bunkhouse!"

The bunkhouse was spouting flame from every window now, as the Cross Bar H gunmen started throwing lead at the corral and springhouse. Lazy kept bellowing orders in his best Quirt Magurn manner. He ordered four men to make a run for the saddleshop—to flank the men in the corral. Two more men he ordered to run for a big haystack, from which they could fire on those behind the springhouse.

But Lazy was keeping his eyes on Quirt's window, and suddenly a head popped out, and he could hear Quirt's wrathful, bewildered voice. Lazy flipped his reloaded Colt up, sent two slugs into the window casing. Quirt's head disappeared like magic. Lazy played his trump, then.

"Hey, Deck! Deck Lavell! You and Pedro come with me! We'll flank 'em from behind the barn! C'mon, you two!" Lazy crouched to hide his height, and ran from the house toward the barn, continuing to yell for Deck Lavell and Pedro. As he

neared the barn he saw the bunkhouse door open and two figures start toward him.

Like a will-o-the-wisp he led them around the barn, then whirled, gun clubbed by the barrel. Pedro came first and Lazy brought the butt of his gun down expertly. Bull loomed out of the shadows, there was a solid s-s-smack.

"Got him," Bull breathed, as Deck sagged limp, and was thrown over the giant's shoulder like a sack of grain.

"Head for the horses," Lazy said. "Gimme the strings—we'll give 'em one more volley, then I'll be along." Bull slipped away in the shadows, as Lazy worked the strings once more, then followed his partner as a perfect fury of gunfire opened up from the bunkhouse.

SLOPPY snorted as Lazy hit the saddle, and then the long-legged hammerhead overtook Bull. The giant was riding easily, with Deck laying in his arms, as a mother carries her baby. Behind them, the firing was still going strong, but growing fainter as they put distance between themselves and the Cross Bar H.

"What happens now?" Bull asked as they neared Town.

"Are you sure Deck's still out?"

"Still out? That's an insult. Remember that time I laid one on your chin—"

"Never mind," Lazy cut in. "Feel around and see if he's got a hideout."

"He has," Bull answered promptly. "A Derringer in an armpit holster."

Lazy reached over, took the gun, flipped the shells out and stuck it back in the holster.

"Here's the key to my hotel room," he said. "Left in sort of a hurry this morning and didn't turn it in. There's a side door to the hotel. You can get to the room without being seen, by it. Take Deck up to the room—tell him Joe Branch lived a few minutes—and recognized Deck as the man who shot him—saw his face in his gunflash. Tell Deck there ain't no way you can prove it in a court—so you're going to kill him right there—and then give Deck a chance to get his Derringer."

Bull nodded. "I gotcha—and if I've got this little back-shooting killer pegged right, he'll do plenty of bragging—"

Lazy turned off at the sheriff's office and Bull continued on toward the hotel. Day was just beginning to break as Lazy opened

the door. Sheriff Langstrom was nodding in his chair. He awoke with a start.

"How'd it come out?" he asked, and rubbed his hands briskly when Lazy told him they'd been successful. Quickly, he explained his plan to the lawman.

They hurried down the deserted street to the hotel, passed through the deserted lobby where the clerk slept shamelessly on duty. Lazy leading the way, they silently took their positions outside the door of his room. Inside, they could hear Bull muttering, and the splash of water. Lazy grinned at the thought of Bull working on Deck to bring him back to consciousness.

"Oh, so you're finally going to wake up?" Bull rumbled. "'Bout time—you dirty back-shooting skunk!" There was a sound of a solid smack, and a whimper from Deck Lavell.

"Think I don't know you plugged Joe Branch, don't you?" Bull was sneering in his most villainous manner. "Well, you're wrong, you yeller-belly sidewinder!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Deck answered, then whimpered again as Bull's hamlike hand smacked across his mouth.

"Don't know what I'm talking about," Bull mimicked. "Don't try to pull that stuff on me, you whelp of a polecat! That slug you put in Joe Branch didn't put his light out as fast as you thought. Joe lived a few minutes—and he saw your face by the flash of your gun—his dying words was that 'Deck Lavell shot me—I seen him do it.' What you turning white around the gills for, Deck?"

"You'll never prove that!" Lavell's voice was low, and scared.

"Yeah, I know I can't," Bull said pleasantly, "so I'm going to kill you—just for the hell of it—kill you with my bare hands—see, I'm putting my gun over here on the wash stand—if you could fight your way over to the gun, Deck, you could plug me and save—"

"I don't need that damn gun!" Lavell's voice was hissing in triumph. "You big slob! Stay away from that gun, or I'll let you have both barrels of this Derringer straight through your guts—you ain't so big but what this little gun'll trim you down to my size—"

Bull was cursing and raving about Lavell tricking him. Deck laughed. "Well, I don't think I'll kill you—just plug you a

couple of times through the spine—paralyze you—but keep you alive for a good hanging—Quirt'll enjoy seeing your neck stretched—and I'll get a bonus!"

"I dare you to keep me alive," Bull argued. "I'll prove that you killed Joe Branch!"

Deck laughed uproariously. "That's a good joke—Quirt'll laugh his insides out when he hears it—sure I killed Joe Branch—Quirt paid me a hundred-dollar bonus to frame you for the killing—but he'll swear I wasn't even near the place that night—"

Lazy opened the door and strolled in. Deck Lavell was sprawled on the bed, his Derringer covering a crouched and quivering Bull Jackson. The weazly little gunman whirled at the opening door, his lips drew back, and the hammer of the Derringer clicked hollowly.

"Reckon you heard enough, eh, Sheriff?" Bull grinned. Deck yelped and made a dive for Bull's gun on the washstand. Bull's fist swung and Deck landed in a limp sprawl back on the bed.

"That runt's chin is getting real spongy from being hit so often," Bull sighed.

"I heard plenty," Sheriff Langstrom said. "This is just what I need to crack down on Quirt Magurn—and I'm sure in debt to you fellows—"

"We didn't do it exactly for you," Lazy grinned. "Though he's sorta worthless, I'd hate to see Mister Francis Per"—a hard boot-toe cracked against his shin—"er—that is, hate to see Bull Jackson hang."

"I'll wake Deck up and march him over to the jail," Langstrom said. "Boy, he's sure out cold—"

"I don't think your jail is going to hold Mr. Lavell," Lazy had been looking out the window as he drawled the words. "Here comes Quirt Magurn and every rider he's got—they've found our little trick and know Deck's gone. They won't let him stay in jail—Quirt can't afford to—"

Even as he talked, Lazy saw Tink Doss dart out into the street, saw Quirt slow down as Tink spoke to him hurriedly. Then the crooked deputy ducked out of sight again. The sight of the deputy brought a frown. Suppose Tink had worked loose from his bonds some time ago and had overheard their conversation with the sheriff? If so, Quirt would know every card they held and play his hand accordingly.

"This hotel's got a cellar that'll do for a

jail," Langstrom said quickly. "Jackson, pick him up—we'll put him there—and the hotel clerk will keep his mouth shut if he knows what's good for him! Hurry!"

CHAPTER XVI

Captured and the Secret Out

LAZY, Bull and the sheriff strolled out on the porch of the hotel a few minutes later. Deck was safely stowed away in the cellar and the bug-eyed clerk sworn to secrecy.

Sheriff Langstrom was plainly nervous, but highly pleased to be holding a trump card against Quirt, because Deck had unwittingly incriminated Quirt in the killing of Joe Branch. Bull Jackson, as always, stood with his huge feet planted far apart, great hands swinging at his side, ready to lash out with his fists, or go for his guns.

Only Lazy seemed at ease. He seemed half asleep, and only mildly interested in life at all, as he lounged against the railing of the porch and waited for Quirt.

Magurn, after a hurried glance into the sheriff's office, had started toward the Silver Spangle, but one of his men spotted the three on the hotel porch, and called his attention to it.

Lazy noted those movements with satisfaction. Evidently Tink had not overheard too much, if anything.

Plainly, Quirt wasn't at all pleased at the sight of Lazy and Bull. He called one or two of his lieutenants about him for a quick war council, then the whole bunch, five in all, moved toward the hotel. The rest of his men were still mounted and sitting their horses in front of the sheriff's office.

"You look kinda nervous, Sheriff," Bull muttered.

"I am!" Langstrom snapped. "Quirt's been getting tougher and tougher here lately, and what can a man do when his own deputies are bribed and won't stand with him?" He shook his head grimly. "This is the showdown—if I pull Magurn's fangs now—everything'll be all right. But if I make my play—it don't jell—I might as well turn in my badge and let Quirt run the Valley—God forbid!"

"The showdown is getting close," Lazy put in, "but Quirt ain't hankering for it this morning—he's too puzzled and afraid

he'd make a wrong move—lemme do the talking."

"I'll do my own talking!" Langstrom snapped.

"Sure, sure," Lazy said placatingly. "All I meant was to let Quirt do all the talking—let him ask questions—we can tell by them how worried he is—and he'll be more worried when we don't answer them."

"Is that a gun Jackson's wearing, Langstrom?" Quirt's flat, cold voice rasped at them from the street.

Bull answered that one himself. "It ain't no powder-puff." Lazy watched the scar on Magurn's face go red, then white. The quirt coiled around his right wrist snaked around nervously as Magurn twitched in an effort to check his rage.

"Jackson's a wanted man, Langstrom," Quirt went on, more deadly now because his voice was flat and cold. "Is that the way you run the sheriff job around here?" But though there was menace in Quirt's voice, one got the feeling that Quirt knew he was treading on thin ice and was going easily for fear he might crash through.

SHERIFF Langstrom felt it, and he followed up the advantage. "I don't come out and tell you how to run the Cross Bar H," the lawman snapped. "Keep your nose outta my business."

Quirt's gunnies sucked in their breath at that, and Lazy saw through half-lidded eyes that Quirt was on the verge of exploding with rage. The scar across his features seemed to be a thing apart from his face, so white it was.

"I won't take much of that talk," Magurn grated. "Not from you, nor nobody else, Langstrom. I ask you a question. How come Jackson is roaming around free?"

"It seems like another fellow confessed that he shot Joe Branch," Lazy cut in with his slowest and laziest drawl. "That right, Sheriff?"

"He sure did," Langstrom answered promptly. "In the presence of witnesses."

Surprise, unbelief were written on Quirt's face, but it quickly gave way to a look of wariness. His crafty eyes narrowed, then he grinned, but it was somewhat sickly.

"Good work, Sheriff," he managed, "hate to see a miscarriage of justice. What say we gather some of my boys up for a posse and capture this hombre?"

"No need," Langstrom said shortly. "We already got him."

Quirt was feeling his way more and more now; afraid that he might let the wrong thing slip, but still wanting to find out all he could.

"Yeah, that's fine," but there was a hollow ring in the killer's voice now. "Where you got him? He ain't in the jail?"

"Oh, no, he ain't there—didn't consider it safe," Lazy broke in with a slow, guileless grin. His arms were hanging lax and easy at his sides, but the fingers of his right hand were spread open, and his eyes, under drooping lids, watched the men in the street with silent deadly intentness. "You see, Quirt, after that disgraceful affair yesterday morning, when Ab Nason and his men tried to commit a lynching, it was considered best to keep the prisoner elsewhere."

Magurn's quirt hand twitched as he listened to Lazy's slow drawl, and the long blacksnake whip writhed in the dust of the street, as if it were showing the torment that raged within its owner. Then suddenly, without another word, Quirt whirled and stalked down the street toward the rest of his men.

"If he leaves town at this stage of the game, he's got a way to slip out of this mess," Lazy drawled. "But if he stays—and keeps some men with him—then he's plumb scared and we know we've got him backed into a corner."

And Quirt stayed in town. He spoke a brief word to his men as he passed by, but he hardly slowed his stride as he stalked on to the Silver Spangle. His men dismounted. Some of them trailed their boss to the saloon. Others strolled around town, and still others took up positions at various places and just sat or lounged against the buildings. Lazy chuckled.

"He's scared, and how! Got the whole town under martial law—but scared to try to pull anything. You sure that hotel clerk ain't going to give it away—about Deck, I mean?"

The sheriff shook his head. "We can count on him. He ain't got no love for the Cross Bar H—they've shot up his hotel too often."

"Then," said Lazy, "I don't see no use worrying. We'll just set tight and give Quirt enough rope to hang hisself with. Let's go eat—I'm hungrier than a bear that just woke up in the spring."

They left the sheriff sitting on the hotel porch and crossed over to the restaurant.

When they were seated at a table with no one in earshot, Bull wrinkled his brow in perplexity.

"Funny that Quirt didn't mention our little visit last night, and he didn't seem curious to know who did kill Joe Branch."

"Not funny," Lazy replied. "Quirt ain't a fool. He knows it was us visited him last night, and he dang well knows Deck Lavell is missing—and that Deck is yellow enough, and dumb enough to talk. Nope, we got Quirt Magurn plenty worried."

"It just come to me last night when the sheriff told us Quirt's sleeping in the big ranchhouse at the Cross Bar H, instead of the bunkhouse with the rest of the men. Who falls heir to the Cross Bar H? Nobody that I ever heard of. Then that makes Quirt the biggest gainer by Hawkins' death, don't it? He just takes over the place."

"Golly, I never thought of that!"

NEITHER did I, till last night. When you started talking about Henry Eldridge killing Hawkins, it didn't make sense. And here's why: that killing wasn't done on the spur of the moment; that is, it might have been done thataway, but the killer had been prepared to do it for a long time and done it the first chance he got. Which means that he had a motive for doing it—and so far we ain't uncovered no motive why Henry Eldridge would kill what everybody thought was his best friend. Did you ever hear of any talk about a will?"

"Well, I did hear some talk that Hawkins thought an awful lot of that Eldridge girl—loved her like she was his own daughter, and that she'd get the place—but Quirt says he hunted high and low for a will—"

"It comes right back to Quirt every time," Lazy put in, but whatever he was going to say further was cut short by a fusillade of shots from up the street.

The partners peered out the grimy window of the restaurant, but the shooting was too far away for them to see. Over on the hotel porch, Sheriff Langstrom hurriedly got out of his chair and started up the street to investigate.

"Lift your mitts, you two!" The voice came from the curtains that separated the front of the restaurant from the kitchen part. Lazy and Bull whirled around—to

stare into the muzzle of a rifle, and two steadily held Colts.

Two men, which Lazy recognized as Cross Bar H gunmen, parted the curtains and stepped inside, one man holding a Winchester, and the other two guns.

"Had to decoy that sheriff out of the way before we could get at you," one man chuckled, then his voice grew grim.

"You two walk out of this restaurant, get on your horses and ride out of town at a slow trot. Some of the boys will meet you at the edge of town—and until they do meet you, there'll be at least four-five rifles and a dozen sixes covering you, savvy? Quirt wants you birds out on the Cross Bar H, for a talk."

Lazy's eyes were shifting rapidly; his mind working swiftly. There was a chance he could outwit these two. He and Bull were still at the table. They could tip that over quickly, gain the precious second they needed to gun-fill their hands. It would be a close chance, maybe a fatal one, but—

But—the man said Quirt wanted to talk to them. That meant Quirt was plenty worried and in talking might let something slip. Lazy glanced at Bull. His big partner took his cue, and they submitted.

"And before you go," the other man said, "unload your own guns—and if you try to reload—"

The kidnapping was well-planned. As the two partners strolled across the street, they could see Cross Bar H men lining the sidewalks. The men were apparently paying no attention to them, unless you looked closely.

But to Town, it must have looked as if Lazy and Bull simply strolled to their horses, mounted, and jogged slowly out of Town.

"What're you waiting for?" Bull hissed, as they swung into their saddles. "We can make a break for it—and remember, our rifles are loaded!"

"That would spoil Quirt's party," Lazy said. "And I got a hunch that we'll find out more from Quirt—at his party—than Quirt'll find out from us!"

Quirt Magurn was sprawled in a big leather chair, in the office room of the big Hawkins ranchhouse, when Lazy and Bull were pushed in. The boss of the Cross Bar H toyed playfully with his quirt while he surveyed them with a cold, tight smile. The scar on his face seemed to be quiver-

ing with delight, as Quirt grinned at his prisoners.

Lazy promptly sat down and shoved his long legs out in a sprawl and began to make a smoke.

"Cool customer, eh?" Quirt laughed, and snapped his quirt. The hissing blacksnake popped like a pistol a few inches from Lazy's face.

"That ain't scaring me, and it won't scare Bull, here," Lazy drawled, "so save your strength."

"Go ahead," Magurn jeered, "make fun of it while you got a chance—but before I get through with you—you'll be crying for mercy!" The little killer snapped out of his chair and paced the room nervously.

"It ain't going to be necessary for you to use that whip on us," Lazy drawled back, blowing smoke from his nostrils. "We ain't exactly dumb, Quirt, and we know when we're licked. So we'll tell you what you want to know."

Quirt whirled around as if he'd been touched with a branding iron.

CHAPTER XVII

A Strange Turn

"**H**OW'D you know I wanted any information from you two?"

"What else would you have brought us out here for?" Lazy countered. "So you can hold back that little hell you're planning for us, 'cause we're talking freely."

Quirt's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he gave Lazy a long, thoughtful look.

"You must be loco, Lazy," Bull rumbled. "You ain't letting that toy whip he's carrying scare you, are you? We ain't got nothing to tell this skunk."

"When I cut that face of yours to ribbons with it," Magurn said, without a trace of emotion in his voice, "you'll change your tune."

Magurn's back was turned to Lazy as he faced the hulking Bull. Lazy favored his partner with a broad wink.

"It's just like I told you in town," Lazy said meaningly, "no use bucking the tiger when you're licked, Bull. And since Quirt's invited us to his little party, we might as well not kick."

Lazy put special emphasis on the word party, and knew that Bull had caught the meaning and remembered what Lazy had

said in town, about learning more from Quirt than Quirt would learn from them. And so Bull put on an act. He sat down and hunched his shoulders dejectedly.

"Yeah, you're right. Go ahead and tell him."

"Tell me what," Magurn asked suspiciously. "I ain't asked neither of you a question yet."

"For one thing," Lazy drawled, "you want to know about Deck Lavell, don't you?"

Magurn's eyes flashed, and his long scar twitched. "Damn right!" he snapped. "Pretty slick party you boys threw out here last night, but I'll see that you don't use Deck as a tool—"

"Ain't nobody going to use Deck as anything—except to keep a pine box from looking so empty," Lazy said unhappily. "Yeah, Deck did confess to killing Joe Branch—but the reason the sheriff didn't have Deck in jail was that Deck's dead. Made a break for it—and Bull plugged him."

"When did that happen?" Quirt asked quickly.

"About four-thirty this morning—in my room at the hotel," Lazy told him. "We tricked Lavell into admitting his guilt—when he saw he was trapped, he tried to blast his way out—and didn't."

Quirt smiled cruelly, the scar on his face twitching nervously. "Might have known you hombres were trying to pull a bluff this morning—that damn tinhorn sheriff woulda been crowing to high heaven if he'd actually had Deck in jail with a confession."

The grin on his face widened and he popped his quirt in the air like some child shooting off firecrackers.

"You're smart, Ladigan," he chuckled, "smart enough to talk when the right time comes. I was worried about Deck—the little rat—tickled pink to hear he's dead." He stopped, grinning at Lazy and letting his quirt run across the fingers of his left hand suggestively. "But there's one more little thing I want to know!"

"We told you everything," Lazy said, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "With Deck dead, the sheriff is just going to let the whole business drop—but since he heard Deck's confession, he wouldn't hold Bull."

"To hell with Deck, I'm sick of hearing about him," Quirt flared. "I want to know

what it was that Bull Jackson found out just before he went to jail!"

"Hey, now!" Lazy said nervously, "that's none of your business. We're after that reward mon—"

Magurn's whip popped in the air right in front of Lazy's eyes.

"All right," Ladigan said grudgingly. "Here it is—Hawkins—your boss—was killed with a high-powered rifle—and the only high-powered rifle in the Valley is owned by Henry Eldridge!"

Magurn just stood there for a moment, no expression on his thin, cruel face, but Lazy saw, or thought he saw, relief in the little foreman's eyes. Then Quirt started to get surprised, in fact, he acted terribly surprised, and then mad.

"That dirty skunk!" he growled. "Passing himself off as the boss' best friend—and then plugging him in the back!"

AND on top of that," Bull stuck in, "putting up the reward—but at least it's fixed so's you can get it."

"Yeah, wasn't that reward idea smart!" Magurn snarled. "Just to throw suspicion off himself." Quirt pounded the table with his quirt butt. "But Eldridge is going to get what's coming to him—the Cross Bar H is going to see that justice is done! C'mon, you two, we're going to town—I think the sheriff oughta know what you've found out."

"You mean you want us to tell Langstrom what we've found out?" Lazy inquired curiously.

"Sure!" Magurn snorted. "He's such a good friend of Eldridge's himself, that he'd never try to pin it on him—but he's got to follow up the lead!"

A crafty look crept in Lazy's sleepy looking eyes, and he didn't make any move to get up from his chair.

"Listen, Magurn," the lanky one said, "Bull found that evidence and we're the only ones that know where that gun was bought—and therefore can prove Eldridge owns it—in case he's gotten rid of it. Now Bull and me are just poor cowpokes, and five thousand—"

Quirt Magurn was in high good humor. He laughed uproariously and clapped Lazy heartily on the back. "Quit worrying—I ain't after the reward money—just the hombre that killed my boss—you'll get

your share of the reward—and maybe the Cross Bar H might add a bonus!"

"I was wondering about the Cross Bar H," Lazy drawled. "Who falls heir to it?"

Quirt's head snapped up quickly. "There ain't no will that we can find—and if there was, it wouldn't be any of your damn business!"

"I was just asking," Lazy said softly.

The three of them went outside, and Quirt yelled orders to get their horses ready. While three men hurriedly threw saddles on their mounts, Quirt walked off in the direction of the bunkhouse, leaving Lazy and Bull standing near the house. They were alone for a moment, but far from free, as a dozen or so men were watching.

"Did you find out what you wanted to know?" Bull asked sarcastically. "If this reward money is ever paid, a fine chance we'll have of collecting it, for all of Quirt's backslapping and hurraing."

"Always jawing like you had the toothache," Larry drawled. "Sure I found out something—that Quirt was mighty relieved about us telling him Eldridge owned that rifle—like he was worried we'd tell him something else—and just like we'd found out, just what he wanted us to find out."

"There's about as much sense to that as there is to a Chinese puzzle!" Bull growled. "What—"

But Quirt's arrival cut the conversation short. The foreman was still in a good humor, and he talked freely on the way to town. Also, Lazy told himself, as they galloped along, a lot of Quirt's fears disappeared, because only one gun guard rode with them. And then, too, Quirt seemed to be in a big hurry to see Sheriff Langstrom, because he set a fast pace into town.

Langstrom jumped up out of his chair as the three of them strode in his office, and there was consternation written on his seamed, weather-beaten face.

"What are you two doing with Magurn?" he snapped suspiciously.

THIS time it was Bull who did the signalling. Standing a head taller than Quirt Magurn, Bull's broad wink passed unnoticed by the foreman of the Cross Bar H.

"With Bull out of jail," Lazy said, "we thought we'd start trying to find the killer and get that reward, since that's what we came to the Valley for. We wanted to

ask Quirt a few questions, and while we was at it, we told him about Deck confessing and then getting himself killed."

"Yeah," Bull cut in hastily, "we didn't want no hard feelings, so we thought it best to explain to Magurn how I shot Deck in the hotel room this morning when he tried to escape—after confessing to Joe Branch's killing."

"Oh, I see," Langstrom said, but it was plain from his tone that he didn't.

"Deck got what was coming to him, and good riddance," Quirt said impatiently. "But that's not what we came here for, Sheriff. These two have uncovered a very vital clue to the killing of my boss—and I want them to tell it to you."

"I'd be durn glad to hear it," Langstrom said, still bewildered by this turn of events.

"It ain't enough to convict a man, mind you," Bull said, "but it's a starter—and enough to arrest him on suspicion and get a confession outta him."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Langstrom said impatiently.

But Quirt couldn't wait. "I'll tell you what it is—Hawkins was killed with a high-powered rifle—the doctor will testify to that—and the only man in the Valley who owns a high-powered rifle is Henry Eldridge!"

Langstrom wheeled angrily to Lazy. "This sounds like some of your doings, Ladigan! But understand, you ain't going to get away with it! I strung along with you to help you get Jackson out of a bad tight, just 'cause I thought you was on the right side—but I see you've been bought over by Magurn—"

"That's a lie!" Quirt snarled. "These two told me that without me paying 'em a cent!"

"Quirt spoke right when he said he hadn't paid us anything," Bull put in. "Eldridge bought a high-powered rifle about five months ago—and I knew it before I got in jail on that Joe Branch business."

"I ain't believing no cock-and-bull tale like that!" Langstrom snorted, whirling to Quirt, "and I'm not arresting Henry Eldridge, either, Magurn!"

Magurn smiled thinly as he lit a long, thin cigar. "In that case, Langstrom, we'll get a lawman from Hondro that will—that'll probably be best, anyhow."

"See what you two have done?" Langstrom growled at Lazy and Bull. "All Ma-

gurn needed was an opening, and you sure have given it to him." I wish I had you back in jail, Jackson, in spite of what Deck Lavell said. I sure don't know what your game is—trying to pin this killing on Henry Eldridge, and all this talk about Deck being—"

Sheriff Langstrom wasn't sure whether he'd better go on or not, and he left the sentence hanging in midair, but Quirt Magurn had caught the implication, and his eyes darted suspiciously around the room.

"What was you going to say, Sheriff?" Quirt's voice was cold again. "All this talk about Deck being—being what? Dead?"

"Who's dead?" asked Tink Doss as he stepped in from the street.

"Deck Lavell," Quirt told him. "These three say Deck confessed to killing Joe Branch—"

"Oh, he confessed all right," Langstrom cut in, "I'd swear that on the witness stand."

"And—" Quirt went on relentlessly, "then they say that Deck tried to shoot his way out, and Bull Jackson killed him up in a hotel room."

Tink rubbed his bandaged head tenderly and glared at Lazy. "Hadn't heard anything about it," he grunted. "What time was that?"

"About four-thirty," Quirt said.

"Four-thirty! Hell, no!" Tink ejaculated. "There wasn't any shots at four-thirty this morning—I oughta know—I didn't sleep a wink—nursing this headache I got—"

"Trying to trick—" Quirt hissed at Lazy as he whirled around, but the words died in his throat.

"I unloaded my gun just before I started for your place this morning, Quirt," Lazy drawled, "just thought I'd reload in case the Indians went on the warpath sudden like."

The loading gate on his Colt clicked, unnaturally loud in the silence, as he snapped the last chamber full and stood grinning at them.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Girl Is Mad

QUIRT snarled like a trapped wolf. His slitted eyes shuttled quickly to Tink Doss, and then to the one gun guard that had come to town with him.

The guard was outside—they could see him through the window, lounging against a post, and Tink Doss, like Quirt, had been napping.

But Tink, knowing that all was not well, and correctly reading Quirt's expression, edged to one side of that office, ready for a quick throw-down on Lazy from the side. And Bull, innocence shining from his rough face, countered that move by shuffling over till he was right behind Tink. The deputy licked his lips nervously and let his hands hang well away from his guns, waiting for Quirt to make the first move.

Lazy was still grinning impishly and holding his gun easily; not in a firing position, but out of the holster, and cocked. He saw indecision sweep over Quirt's face; knew that Quirt was aware that Tink would be taken care of instantly—that it would be between him and Magurn.

"I'd pouch my gun and give you a better break," Lazy said, still grinning, "but the time ain't ripe for me to kill you yet, Quirt—and knowing you for a prudent man—which is a perlite name for yellow—I'm keeping my gun out, 'cause you sure won't buck that advantage."

Sheriff Langstrom broke the play up completely by shouldering his way roughly between the two, his eyes hard and bleak on Quirt.

"I've told you about starting gunplay around my office, Quirt," the lawman snapped. "You ain't too big to spend some time in the calaboose."

"And I'm telling you that I'm going to kill this Ladigan some day!" Magurn blared. "And I don't give a damn if it's in your office or your parlor. Nobody's coming into this Valley and make Quirt Magurn eat crow!"

"Looks like Ladigan's done it!" Langstrom retorted. "This is the second time he's called you yellow and you've took it!"

Magurn's rage boiled over. Hissing profanity, he stepped back quickly for room, and brought his quirt up to lash the lawman. But in stepping back he bumped into Bull.

The giant grunted with impatience, wrapped one arm around the foreman and lifted him from the floor. With his other hand, Bull reached out, twisted the quirt from Magurn's wrist, then dropped him.

Quirt said nothing, but the long scar on his cheek went fish-belly white against the flaming red flush of anger on the rest

of his face. Then with an effort he controlled himself.

"Think you've got the upper hand, don't you, Langstrom?" His smile was wintry and his voice back to its flat deadly pitch. "Holding Deck over me figuring to make me jump through the hoop when you snap your fingers. Don't be too sure—without these two"—he jerked his head contemptuously toward Lazy and Bull—"you'll sing a different tune!"

"Maybe the sheriff don't want to be without us," Lazy drawled.

"It ain't what the sheriff wants—it's what he gets—and he might have to get along without you," Quirt said softly, and turned to leave.

But a light, quick step outside stopped him, and before he could leave, Helen Eldridge was in the office. She looked surprised, and parted her lips as if to say something, but just then she caught sight of Bull, and the temper that went with her red hair blazed. She whirled on the lawman.

"What's this ruffian doing out of jail?"

HELLEN ELDRIDGE was quite small, but when her temper was ruffled she could draw herself up in a queenly manner that allowed her to dominate any gathering. And, Lazy noted, she was doing that just now. Although considerably shorter than Sheriff Langstrom, one got the impression that Helen Eldridge was actually looking down at him!

"Why—uh—Ladigan over there—" Langstrom was too flustered at her sudden burst of fire to talk fast.

Helen Eldridge whirled on Lazy. "I might have known you'd be mixed up in it some way!" she stormed. "There's been more trouble in the Valley since you arrived than I can remember! What kind of flim-flam are you pulling on Sheriff Langstrom to get Jackson out of jail? You won't get away with it! He killed an Eagle Track man and he's going to pay for it! Answer me, don't just stand there!"

"What good would it do to answer you, ma'am?" Lazy drawled with exasperating slowness. "You couldn't hear nobody, with all the clatter you're making!"

Helen Eldridge opened her lips, but no sound came out. Her eyes became round with wonder, and for a moment she forgot her anger. Once before she'd had an encounter with this quiet stranger; had seen

him exhibit cool defiance even with a gun shoved right against his ribs. And neither that time—nor this time—was he treating her in the manner she was accustomed to being treated—like Helen Eldridge, daughter of the Valley's biggest rancher.

But astonishment could not hold her temper in check long, for it bounced back into force like a rubber ball. Towering above her, Lazy saw her head tilt back defiantly.

"Well? I'm waiting. Let's hear your story."

"No story," Lazy sighed, "we just found the hombre that really killed Joe Branch—and it wasn't Bull at all."

"What is all this, Sheriff?" she appealed to the lawman.

Langstrom drew himself up with a grim smile at Quirt Magurn. "Ladigan and Jackson forced a confession out of the real killer of Joe Branch, Helen," the old lawman said. "It was Deck Lavell."

"I wouldn't be too quick to believe that story, if I were you," Quirt Magurn told the girl sourly. "Langstrom and his two new sidekicks have been spreading it around, but so far there's little to back it up. It's one thing to accuse Deck Lavell of doing it—and another to prove it."

"It sounds likely to me, Magurn!" Helen Eldridge snapped. "I've told dad that you were the cause of all the trouble—and I believe some day it'll be proven!"

"You also told Jonas Hawkins that," Quirt accused. "Tried to get him to fire me—oh, I ain't forgetting!"

"I certainly did tell Uncle Jonas!" the girl snapped back. "And that's what's made me all the more suspicious of you—I kept telling Uncle Jonas to watch you closer—and right after he promised me he would—he was killed! I want Grant Tabor to hear this. I've been warning him that you were all bad, Magurn, but he's stubborn and thinks he knows everything, especially since Dad made him foreman a while back."

"I ain't forgettin' that Grant and some of your boys were mixed up in that would-be lynching the other morning," the lawman grunted. "You better tell that Grant Tabor to take off them fancy clothes he's been wearing since your dad made him foreman and get back to hard work!"

The girl stepped to the door and motioned to someone down the street.

"I'm sorry about the other morning," the girl replied. "Grant's promotion has gone

to his head completely, but I think the jolt he's going to get will settle him down and show him exactly what Magurn is."

BOOTs clumped outside and Grant Tabor stepped nervously inside. Lazy eyed Tabor's fancy get-up with distaste, for Tabor wore a silk shirt, blue serge trousers, a cream-colored Stetson, and fancy stitched boots. An ivory-handled Colt rode in a beaded holster on his side.

Lazy didn't like the man's dress, nor his face. His eyes were shifty—they darted nervously around, and Tabor appeared somewhat uncomfortable, probably thinking of his part in the lynching bee.

"I've been telling you to stay away from Quirt Magurn, and you've argued that he's all right," Helen Eldridge told her father's foreman. "Now listen to this." She told him of Deck Lavell's confession to killing Joe Branch.

"And we aim to prove," Langstrom said, when she had finished, "that Deck was paid by Quirt to do it."

"Aim to prove!" Quirt jeered sarcastically. "Grant, you know damn good and well I ain't got no reason to have any Eagle Track men killed." He addressed the whole group. "Grant and me have combined our forces to hunt down and stamp out the rustlers that's taking a heavy toll of cattle offa both the Eagle Track and the Cross Bar H—and we're going to keep on! Big outfits like us have got to fight to live!"

"That's right," Grant Tabor agreed nervously. "By combining our forces we have enough men to patrol the whole Valley all the time." He threw a scornful look toward the lawman. "We thought we'd protect ourselves, since it's darn little we're getting from the law!"

"I forbid the Eagle Track to have any dealings with the Cross Bar H!" Helen Eldridge told Grant Tabor firmly. "And you'll take orders from me until my father comes home!"

Quirt Magurn threw back his head and laughed loudly, jeeringly at the girl.

"When your father gets home!" he jeered. "So you'll string along with the sheriff and his two new deputies till your dad gets home! And then what?"

Sheriff Langstrom looked uneasily at Lazy and Bull. . . . Grant Tabor, Tink Doss and the girl looked puzzled. Bull was looking sourly at Lazy, but Lazy apparently didn't mind. Of all the people in the room,

he was the only one completely composed. He was rolling a cigarette, taking great pains to do a good job, and was watching Quirt with a half-amused grin on his face.

"What do you mean, 'then what?'" the girl asked Quirt, puzzled and afraid.

"Ask your pal, the sheriff," Quirt jeered.

Langstrom squirmed uneasily under the girl's glance, then turned hotly to Quirt. "I noticed Ladigan reloaded his gun after he got in my office—I got a good hunch he and Jackson didn't go out to your place on their own hook—they were forced when I was decoyed away this morning."

"What's the matter?" Quirt jeered.

"Scared to tell her?"

Langstrom looked appealingly toward Lazy. "All you got to do is say the word, son, and I'll mark that tale down as one Quirt made you tell. You were forced to go to the Cross Bar H, this morning, wasn't you?" The old lawman was almost pleading.

Lazy nodded. "We had our choice, git on our horses and ride out there quiet-like, or git chewed up with a lot of lead."

"Then Quirt did force you to tell that story, didn't he?" Langstrom asked eagerly.

"We-e-el," Lazy rubbed his chin reflectively. "Not exactly. He did force us to tell the story, yeah." Lazy sighed, and looked down, knowing that Helen Eldridge was going to be awful hurt—and mad—in a moment. "But he didn't make it up for us in the first place."

Quirt laughed again, then turned to Helen Eldridge. "I'll tell you," he growled brutally, "and I won't mince words doing it, neither. We got evidence that'll convict your old man of killing Jonas Hawkins!"

"You're a liar, Quirt Magurn!" Helen Eldridge flared, standing very straight before the foreman.

Quirt threw his head back and laughed again. Puzzled and hurt by his behavior, the girl bit her lip and looked around uncertainly.

"This isn't true, is it, that Jackson and Ladigan are telling this tale?" Helen Eldridge addressed Sheriff Langstrom, her tone more appealing than questioning.

Sheriff Langstrom colored, and glared at Lazy, then at Bull Jackson. Helen Eldridge looked at Bull and the giant shuffled his feet nervously, dropping his eyes quickly.

"Of course it's true!" Quirt Magurn cut in savagely. "Jonas Hawkins was killed

with a high-powered rifle—the doctor can testify to that 'count the size of the hole it left—and Bull Jackson found out your dad owns a high-powered rifle—the only one in the Valley!"

Helen Eldridge turned to Lazy and Bull. To Lazy's surprise, she was not angry.

"I don't know what your game is, nor what you expect to gain by it, but I know you will never convict my father of this murder. I know it! It's absurd. Why, father wouldn't—"

"Now, now, girl," Sheriff Langstrom said soothingly, "let's don't talk about it any more."

"But there is something I want to say," the girl insisted. "Something that must be said—to stop this ugly rumor about my father!"

"Whatever it is," Sheriff Langstrom said sternly, "it had best be said later, when the time comes. There are people in this room that are not your friends, Helen, and whatever you might say, might give them too much information!"

The girl nodded thoughtfully, and there was a faint, triumphant smile on her face. "You're right, Sheriff Langstrom. What I have to say can best be said later."

CHAPTER XIX

Captives Again

THE girl motioned Grant Tabor to follow, and walked quickly out of the office. For a minute there was silence in the office, and then Quirt laughed softly.

"She won't be so high and mighty when that old man of hers is hung."

"My stomach won't stand no more of you today, Quirt," Sheriff Langstrom said bitingly. "Git."

Quirt laughed again and strolled out. The old lawman's angry gaze swept around to Lazy and Bull.

"Reckon I've seen enough of you two for a spell," he grated.

"We were just leaving," Lazy said, and they followed Quirt outside. Magurn and his single gun guard were in earnest conversation only a few feet away. They stopped talking as the two partners stepped out on the sidewalk.

"Don't reckon you're planning on taking us back with you," Lazy suggested sarcastically.

He hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt, spraddled his legs wide and faced Magurn and his gunman squarely. Bull towered beside and slightly behind his sleepy-looking partner.

If Magurn was mad, or chagrined, he tried hard to conceal it. "Reckon I've found out all I want to know from you two," he said meaningly.

"And we sure found out what we wanted to know from you," Bull rumbled cheerfully.

The remark hit a sore spot and Magurn flared in instant anger. His right hand twitched convulsively, feeling for the whip that was no longer there, and his left hand edged closer to his gun.

"You ain't scaring nobody, Squirt Magurn!" Bull rasped. "The fight would be too fair to suit you—two against two!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's right," Quirt Magurn said very softly. "Too fair — why should I take a chance with you hombres—when there's a safe way of taking care of you!"

Quirt's lips lifted in a sneer; he turned on his heel and walked off quickly.

"And that," Lazy muttered to his companion, "means that Quirt has us tagged for a bullet in the back!"

"It won't be the first time some skunk has had that same idea," Bull said, undisturbed.

They headed for the restaurant to resumé their meal that had been so rudely interrupted early that morning. The Chinese proprietor fled headlong to his kitchen at the sight of them, evidently fearing that they would blame him for that morning's trap, and they were forced to go back in the kitchen and drag him out.

Lazy tried out his pidgin English on the fellow, trying to make him understand that they did not blame him. But it didn't work—the Chink refused to believe he was forgiven so easily. It wasn't until Bull clenched a huge fist, shoved it under the Chinaman's nose and roared for food that they got any service. And while they were stuffing down beans, beef and coffee that would have vied Bull for strength, Lazy grew thoughtful.

"Time to take stock of what progress we've made so far, Mister Frances—all right—all right—I ain't hankering to have hot coffee throwed at me."

Bull took a sip of the coffee instead. "Don't look to me like we've made any

progress. In fact," he added bitingly, "since you come to town, all we been doing is getting into—and out of—trouble!"

"Considering the source of that unkind remark—and therefore, disregarding it entirely," Lazy said between gulps of beans, "I'd say we have made progress—in fact, I'd say that the end is not far off."

"Yeah," Bull agreed. "The end of us—and Magurn lead in our backs."

"That's what I mean by progress," Lazy rejoined. "Quirt knows that too many killings would bring a strong force of lawmen from Hondro to this Valley—he don't want that—therefore he wouldn't figure on killing us, if there was any other way out. That means we're getting close—and Quirt knows he's got to get rid of us."

"Getting close to what?" Bull asked.

"Close to Quirt Magurn," Lazy went on. "I don't know whether Quirt killed Hawkins himself, or not—but I know that Helen Eldridge is right—Magurn is at the bottom of all the dirty work in this Valley—and solving Hawkins' murder will be the lightning bolt that'll start the stampede!"

"Meaning you don't believe that Eldridge killed Hawkins at all?"

"Course not. Why was Quirt worried when he found out we'd uncovered a clue to the killer? Why? Because he thought maybe we'd found the real killer, that's why! And why was he so tickled when we told him we suspected Eldridge? Why? 'Cause that's exactly what he wanted us to find, and it made it even better for him—two strangers in the Valley accusing Eldridge, instead of Magurn doing it himself!"

"Maybe Deck Lavell killed Hawkins and Quirt paid him to do it, like Joe Branch."

"Deck fits into the picture somewhere," Lazy said. "If he didn't actually pull the trigger, he might have cocked the gun—I think he was that close to the killing."

"Ain't you sorta forgetting Ab Nason and Jake Dutcher?" Bull asked.

"Not for a minute," Lazy said promptly. "And before long we're going to pay Ab Nason a visit; in fact, there ain't no time like the present."

THEY had to leave their money on the counter, since the Chinaman had no intention of getting near Bull. Walking up the street to their horses, Bull spied a familiar shape.

"Look, Quirt musta rode home alone—

there's the fellow that came to town with us today, still hanging around."

"And there's Sheriff Langstrom waving at us to come over to his office," Lazy answered. "Something tells me we're going to have to postpone our trip to Nason's."

Sheriff Langstrom was mopping nervous sweat from his forehead when they entered. He waved them to sit down.

"I got to trust you two—whether I like it or not," the old sheriff grunted. "Before this morning I wouldn't have worried about it, but when you rode in with Quirt and started telling that long tale—"

"You saw our guns were unloaded," Lazy said. "What's putting them worry lines in your face?"

The lawman jerked his head toward the Cross Bar H gunman, who could be seen through the window as he lounged in front of the saloon across the street.

"Him and Tink Doss," Langstrom snapped. "While that fellow over there watches every move I make, Tink Doss is combing the town, looking for Deck."

"And you think—"

"That Tink will uncover Deck. When he does—well, I know Quirt. He's right this minute collecting his men and coming back to town with every one of them. I could hold 'em off for a while—maybe kill six or seven of them, but—"

"What do you want us to do?" Bull asked bluntly.

"Take Deck to Hondro—where he'll be safe till we can get him to trial. I'll deputize you two right now—if you say the word—"

Lazy raised his right hand. "Hurry, Sheriff. Remember Quirt's in a hurry too."

When the brief ceremony was over, Lazy turned to Bull. "I'll go to the livery and arrange for a horse for Deck. Sheriff, you find Deck and make him stand hitched till we get a good head start."

"And me," Bull rumbled. "I'll step across the street and put that hombre to sleep!" He rubbed his tough knuckles with satisfaction. "Then I'll slip down to the hotel cellar, hog-tie Deck and we'll be on our way."

Lazy mounted Sloppy and leading Bull's horse, trotted off toward the livery. He grinned to himself as Magurn's watcher suddenly began to take an interest in his movements. But Bull was moving toward the spying gunman, like a slow-moving, all-powerful tornado.

At the livery, he quickly arranged for a stout horse for Deck, and hurriedly filled saddlebags with trail rations. All this took only a few minutes, but when he again appeared on the street, the scene was changed.

Magurn's gunman was sprawled ingloriously in the street, with a small crowd of Town's people gathered around watching him sleep. Bull was hurrying into the hotel. Sheriff Langstrom was nowhere in sight.

Deck was cursing and trying to kick as Bull dragged him into daylight. But to the giant, these were only petty annoyances, and he slammed Deck into the saddle roughly, and lashed him securely to the kak. People stared curiously, but whether it was their lack of affection for a Magurn rider, or whether they knew it was trouble to brush shoulders with Lazy and Bull, they did not interfere.

"Quirt'll overtake us!" Deck Lavell promised grimly as they cleared the outskirts of Town and swept toward The Notch. "Quirt'll see that I never go to trial."

"Yeah," Lazy drawled drily, "even if he has to put a bullet between your eyes."

"What'da you mean?" Deck snarled savagely. "Quirt wouldn't do a trick like that!"

"This morning I told Quirt you were dead," Lazy went on, "and he seemed tickled pink—said you'd gotten what you deserved. We're taking you to Hondro just to keep Quirt from killing you before you have a trial, Deck."

"You can't make me believe that stuff!" Deck jeered. "Quirt ain't the kind to let any of his men down. He'll come after me—"

"In fact," Bull yelled from the rear, "he's coming now. From the looks of that dust cloud, Lazy, the sheriff was right—Quirt's got every man in the saddle!"

LAZY looked back. Bull was right. A big cloud of dust was boiling up from the outskirts of Town, moving along their back trail.

Deck Lavell cheered loudly, and yelled himself hoarse shouting curses and jeers at his captors.

"We'll make it to the Notch with room to spare," Lazy told Deck, "then one of us can hold the Notch while the other takes you on to Hondro—you're crowing too soon, Deck."

"Like hell—!" Deck started, but Bull's voice cut him short.

"Don't look like he is," Bull stated grimly. "Look yonder—Quirt figured ahead of us—and played his cards accordingly. We might make it—but we're in for a scrap!"

Lazy followed Bull's pointing finger. Off to their left was another cloud of dust, moving toward the base of the Notch mountain. Lazy now remembered that there were two trails up the mountain—one that led straight from Town, and the other that came from the Valley. Part way up the mountain they joined and continued up the mountain as one narrow winding trail.

It was plain how Quirt had figured. Thinking maybe that the sheriff might try to take Deck away, he'd sent one bunch of riders on ahead, straight across the Valley. As Bull had stated, the three of them, and Quirt's advance guard, would reach the spot where the trails met, about the same time. Lazy cursed under his breath, as he realized Quirt had outguessed them again. Then his features settled into grimly determined lines.

"They've ridden further — their horses will be more winded," he snapped. "C'mon, Sloppy! Stretch them legs! You got more speed than this!"

Sloppy responded gallantly, and Lazy breathed thanks that he'd taken care in choosing Deck's mount. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they began to draw ahead. The trail was slanting sharply upward now, and already their mounts' shoes were ringing sharply against the stones that littered the mountain trail. With grim mercilessness, they used spur and whip on their flagging horses, as the trail grew steeper.

"Believe—we'll make it—now," Lazy whispered into Sloppy's ears, as the gallant animal fought the steepness of the trail, and the junction appeared ahead.

Shots rattled ahead, shots that came from above the junction! Deck Lavell cheered crazily at the sound of them. Lazy palmed his Colt, bent low over Sloppy's neck. More shots spattered—Lazy hunched, listening for the whine of lead. But it did not come.

"Somebody above the junction is shooting at Quirt's men!" Bull roared triumphantly. "Look!"

Lazy needed no second bidding. Farther up the trail, two men had stepped from the brush, were levelling rifles and pumping fast shots down the other trail. Unseen by Lazy and Bull, Quirt's men were answering

the fire, but it was plain that they'd been surprised, and were retreating hastily.

"Never thought I'd see the day," Bull yelled, "that Ab Nason and Jake Dutcher would pitch in and help us fight a scrap!"

CHAPTER XX

Following Lazy's Hunch

THE three galloped on up the trail to where Ab Nason and Jake Dutcher were still throwing lead at both Quirt's outfits. They pulled to a stop, grabbed their rifles and began to sing the same tune to Quirt.

Their four rifles laid down a blanket of hot lead on each trail, and it discouraged the Cross Bar H riders promptly. In some confusion, Quirt and his men retreated out of rifle range.

"Sure can't understand it," Lazy said, scratching his head. "Figured you two would throw lead at us, not for us."

"Don't exactly understand it myself," Ab Nason said, somewhat embarrassed. "Things are all mixed up, and I don't know where we stand. Jake and I heard that Henry Eldridge was coming back from Hondro—we were heading for the Notch. We wanted to have a talk with him," he added grimly. "But then we heard a rumor that Sheriff Langstrom had something on Quirt Magurn that worried Quirt plenty—and that you fellows helped the sheriff get it."

"We had a pair of field glasses," Jake Dutcher finished for Ab. "We saw what was going on down there—and decided to slow 'em up for a minute. What you got Deck Lavell tied up for?"

Lazy explained Deck's confessing to the killing of Joe Branch, and Quirt's desire to shut Deck up. When he'd finished, both Ab and Jake were looking at the two partners with much more respect. Ab cleared his throat loudly, grew red in the face, and awkwardly extended his hand.

"Reckon I want to apologize for that business—you know—the other night—kinda lost my head—up there on the mountain—"

"Forget it, farmer!" Bull snorted, "you wiped that slate plumb clean when you slang lead a minute ago—and we ain't got time for a tea party. Quirt's up to something!"

Quirt's men had once more advanced to the foot of the mountain — and at that

point were out of sight to the group above. A riderless horse was trotting around in plain sight.

"They're afoot, and closing in. C'mon, let's ride." Lazy led the band upward. A bend in the trail ahead put them in plain sight from below. Guns spattered at them from the brush—and horsemen started up the trail once more.

"Some afoot—and some still mounted for a chase!" Lazy said. "We'll be in plain sight of those in the brush on foot all the way up the trail."

"And some of them are riding through the brush to try to get to the Notch ahead of us," Bull said. He pointed down the mountainside, where underbrush was moving. They threw shots at the spot, and flushed a couple of riders, sent them scurrying back down the mountain.

"Hey! Look out!" It was Jack Dutcher who yelled the warning, but he was too late.

Deck Lavell had whirled his horse and was galloping at a crazy, break-neck speed down the dangerous trail. During the excitement of the battle the little gunman had been able to work at his bonds without being noticed. He'd worked his hands free, loosened the tie rope that tied his mount to Lazy's saddle. Gradually, the rope had become looser, and when the knot fell open, Deck grabbed his chance.

Jake Dutcher raised his rifle, but Lazy knocked the barrel up.

"He won't do us no good dead," he sighed, "and he's too far away to catch."

"Hey, Quirt! Hey! I got loose! I'm coming! Don't shoot, it's me!" Deck rode down the mountain yelling like a crazy man. A little ways down, a sharp turn blotted him from view, but they could still hear his horse as it continued its wild plunge downward.

"Hey, Quirt!" Deck's voice grew fainter, then suddenly it changed. "Hey, don't do that—it's me, Deck! I got loo—Don't—I ain't got a gu—"

A single shot rang out.

Deck's yelling ceased abruptly, and there was silence, save for the echo of the shot as the high mountain peaks playfully flung the sound back and forth.

"And that," Bull said dejectedly, "puts us right back where we started from—no clue except that Hawkins was killed with a high-powered rifle, and Henry Eldridge—and—" Bull stopped in embarrassment.

AB NASON laughed. "It's all right, and I think me and Jake owe you two an explanation. Remember I told you we owned that rifle together? And Jake and I had both talked over the fact that Hawkins needed a killing. We'd made threats in front of people."

"And the rifle was where either of us could get it, without the other knowing it," Jake Dutcher said. "When Hawkins was killed, both me an Ab was scared the other had done it—and—"

"That's enough for me," Lazy drawled. "I never figured either of you were mixed up in it, anyhow—and I'm sure now since Quirt's acted the way he has."

"Where do we go from here?" Bull asked.

Lazy scratched his chin reflectively. "Up to now, we've been playing well known clues—following 'em up to see where they lead."

"And they all lead right to the same place," Bull stuck in promptly. "A gun fight."

"Yeah, they lead to nowhere. So this time, let's play a hunch. C'mon, we're going to pay a social visit to the Eagle Track!"

"That'll make the hunch just like anything else," Bull sighed, "'cause that'll lead right to a gun fight, too."

"I'd take my time going back down the mountain," Ab Nason said. "It would be like Quirt to leave a few men for an ambush—that's the way he works."

"A good idea," Lazy nodded. "Also we'll stay clear of the trail going down, and stick to the brush."

But before they'd reached the bottom of the mountain they saw Quirt's men riding off, the whole band headed toward the Cross Bar H instead of going back to town. One rider was leading a horse, and it needed no second look to identify the grim burden on the lead horse.

"What was it Deck said?" Lazy drawled. "Quirt would take care of him. Yeah, Quirt took care of him, all right."

Traveling slowly, so as to allow Quirt and his men to stay out of sight in front, the two partners followed the band ahead for a while. The mid-afternoon sun was beating down with all fury and their horses took it wasy. After an hour's easy ride, Bull pointed ahead.

"We'd better turn to the right at that clump of cottonwoods yonder," he suggest-

ed. "To go any farther, the way we're going, would put us almost in sight of the Cross Bar H—and me for one is in favor of giving that place a wide berth. And if I ain't being too inquisitive, just what in thunder are we headed for the Eagle Track for, anyhow? Eldridge ain't there."

"No, but Helen Eldridge is."

"And a fine reception she'll give us," Bull hooted.

"We'll have to take that and like it," Lazy replied. "I want to find out something from her. Remember she said she told Hawkins that Magurn was bad? How'd she know that? If she'll tell us, it might lead to something."

"She'll just say it was her woman's initiation, or whatever it is the women have, and let it go at that," Bull grumbled.

"My hunches usually turn out pretty good," Lazy argued, "and right now I got me a hunch that we might find out something at the Eagle Track!"

"And here's something!" Bull exclaimed, pointing to the ground. They had reached the clump of cottonwood trees. The trail of the big band of horsemen continued straight on toward the Cross Bar H. But there were clear hoofprints showing that at least two of the riders had turned off and taken the same trail they intended to follow.

"Now how in hell did Quirt know we was going to the Eagle Track?" Bull grunted.

"He didn't," Lazy said. "Those two are either going to the Eagle Track to take a message for Quirt—or they're Eagle Track men. C'mon!"

They lifted their horses into a lope and topped the next swell. Far ahead they saw a small dust cloud, just disappearing over another rise. At Lazy's urging, they spurred faster, but evidently the two riders ahead were also traveling fast, because the next time they came in sight, they were as far away as ever.

Then in the distance they could see the buildings of the Eagle Track, a nest of tiny blocks surrounded by trees, like a midget oasis in the wide expanse of grazing land.

Lazy called a halt and they watched the two riders ahead.

"Looks like your hunch might amount to something," Bull admitted. "Them two shore ain't acting right. They're riding a good two miles out of their way, just to

make it look like they just got back from where they ain't been."

Lazy nodded. "Somebody on the Eagle Track is playing Quirt's game, all right—and they don't want Helen Eldridge to know it, either."

THE two riders ahead had dipped into a shallow swale, and then had turned their mounts sharply and ridden to the left for a full mile before they started to approach the Eagle Track again. To all outward appearances, to those at the Eagle Track, they were riding in from the range, and had been nowhere near Town or the Notch.

The two partners wasted no more time after that, but lifted their horses to a fast gallop. As they neared the Eagle Track they saw that their arrival had been noticed, and when they pulled their lathered mounts to a halt at the Eagle Track corral, a half dozen or more grim, silent cowhands were standing around. Some had their hands on their gun butts, suggestively, while one or two openly carried rifles. The rough circle of men opened for them to ride through, then closed grimly as they swung out of the saddle.

As he swung to the ground, Lazy let his eyes rove casually over the horses in the corral. Two of them were sweaty with saddle marks still plainly showing.

"Howdy," Lazy waved his hand in casual greeting to the men who stared silently back. These men, with the exception of one or two, were not of the same breed as Quirt Magurn's hands. These men bore the marks of honest, hard-working punchers, ready to fight for their outfit, it was true, but not professional gunfighters.

The two exceptions, however, bore the marks of gunfighters. One was short and chunky, with powerful bulging shoulders, thick trunk and sturdy, muscular legs. The other was slight in build, with a white, pasty-colored face. His eyes were almost white, and they were wide, and seemed to have the unblinking stare of a corpse.

"What's your business on the Eagle Track?" A big, rawboned puncher with a mop of red hair had stepped forward.

"Wanted to talk with Miss Eldridge," Lazy said slowly, rolling a smoke and ignoring the big puncher's hand caressing his gun butt.

"I think you've talked to her enough today!" the redhead flared back. "Fork your

cayuses and fog outta here—or we may ram that talk you made about our boss this morning down your throats." He shifted his gaze to Bull. "I rode a lot of trails with Joe Branch and I ain't swallowing that hogwash about Deck Lavell!"

It was a challenge. The big redhead spraddled his legs a little further apart, hunched for a fast draw. But Bull was ignoring the dare, and Lazy strolled indolently between the two.

"Sheriff Langstrom is peddling the same hogwash about Deck Lavell," Lazy told the fiery redhead gently. "Talk to the sheriff—and then if you want gun talk with this runt partner of mine—he'll oblige."

"That's only the half of it." It was the pasty-faced gunman talking now, and his voice had a leering, contemptuous ring. His unblinking, colorless eyes seemed to sparkle, and Lazy knew he was looking at a deadly killer that was working himself up to another killing. "There's still that talk about our boss killing Hawkins." His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Me? I don't like your face—and when I don't like—"

"That's enough, Whitey!" Helen Eldridge's cool crisp voice broke in. The girl had approached unnoticed. The gunman called Whitey looked at Helen Eldridge a long moment, his lips lifted in a contemptuous grin and he shrugged.

"Howdy, Miss Eldridge," Lazy grinned, sweeping his hat off. "We'd like to talk to you a few minutes." He turned his back to the pasty-faced gunman.

"All right, Whitey, you and Slag," Grant Tabor's nervous voice broke in, "take their guns!"

Something hard jabbed Lazy in the back, and he knew without looking that he and Bull were covered by the guns of the two.

CHAPTER XXI

Two Conversations

"**M**OST unfriendly Valley I was ever in," Bull complained. "Always taking your hardware, or putting you in jail, or trying to put a rope around your neck."

"Nobody asked you to come to the Eagle Track in the first place," Tabor told him hotly.

"Got anything to hide, Tabor?" Lazy

asked insolently of the foreman. Tabor flushed and bit his lip.

The girl had watched the transfer of guns in silence, and she said nothing as Whitey and the chunky gunman called Slag expertly felt over the two partners for hideouts. When it was over, she turned to Tabor.

"It sounds a lot like Quirt Magurn—to take their guns. Is it really necessary?"

"I'm trying to do what I think is right, Helen!" Grant retorted in an aggrieved tone. "These men have started trouble every place they've gone. They won't start much without their guns."

"Not wanting to argue with your foreman, miss," Lazy grinned easily, "it's not that we stir up trouble—the trouble's already there—it just breaks out when we start asking questions."

"You're not going to get your guns back, if that's what you're trying to say!" Tabor flared. He turned to the girl and said stiffly, "Of course, Helen, if you want to relieve me as foreman—"

"That's ridiculous, Grant," the girl said quickly. "I wish your feelings weren't so easily hurt."

"I did what I thought was best," Tabor went on piously. "After what happened this morning, I am convinced that these two men are in Quirt Magurn's pay!"

Lazy chuckled. "If you could see our pockets, Miss, you'd know we wasn't on *anybody's* payroll. We came out here to have a talk with you, Miss Eldridge. Alone," he added quickly, as Tabor started to speak.

"Helen, I forbid you to be alone with these men," Grant Tabor said pompously. Lazy saw that the girl didn't like being ordered; her chin started to tilt into the air, then she hesitated. Lazy looked at her red hair, at the obstinate cut of her thoroughly feminine chin.

"Kind of bad business, Tabor," Lazy said softly, "telling a redheaded lady what she'd ought to do and not to do."

Tabor drew his breath in sharply, but before he could speak, Helen Eldridge had made up her mind.

"I'm still my own boss, Grant." She turned to Lazy. "I'll talk to you in Dad's office."

Tabor started to object strenuously, but the girl turned and walked off. Lazy followed her. Bull looked over his shoulder

at the gunman called Slag, his huge face wreathed in a devilish grin.

"You just hold onto my gun, sonny," he told Slag in a fatherly tone. "The first time I get a minute, I'll teach you how to shoot." Then he followed Lazy and the girl.

Eldridge's office was in reality a corner room of the big, one-storied ranchhouse. An outside door opened into the office, and then two doors led from the office into the dining room and living room respectively.

"I suppose this visit has something to do with my father," Helen Eldridge said tensely. "I assure you he can prove his—"

"Had forgotten all about him," Lazy admitted truthfully. "Nope, this is something else."

"Just what are you two doing in the Valley?" she asked. "Are you really deputies, as the gossip says?"

"No-o-o," Lazy drawled, "reckon we really ain't got no business in the Valley. Bull, here, was lured by the five thousand your dad put up for the killer of your Uncle Hawkins."

"He's not really my uncle, I just grew up calling him that."

"Then Bull got in a tight, and that's where I came in," Lazy went on. "After that, well, things kept right on happening and we kept sticking around, thinking all the time the five thousand was as good as in our hands. Then this morning Sheriff Langstrom made us deputies."

"I don't believe it," the girl said quickly. "Show me your badge."

"Sheriff was in a hurry to get Deck Lavell out of town," Lazy admitted ruefully. "He kinda forgot the badges."

"Deck Lavell? Where does he fit in? I don't believe you can prove that Deck Lavell killed Joe Branch. I don't understand Sheriff Langstrom believing that story."

"If Deck Lavell *had* killed Joe Branch, and Quirt paid him to do it," Lazy went on, "Quirt wouldn't let Dick live—is that what you meant to say?"

"It certainly is," the girl said quickly. "Quirt would never rest as long as there was a chance of anyone pinning a crime on him—he'd turn Town upside down till he found Deck."

"Deck's dead, ma'am," Lazy said simply. "Killed by Quirt and his men while we

were trying to take him to Hondro to wait for trial."

The girl stood silent in shocked surprise. "Then it is true Quirt Magurn paid Deck to kill Joe—that means that—"

"Quirt's at the bottom of all the trouble in the Valley," Lazy said. "You had him pegged right, ma'am." He told her the whole story of the brief fight on the mountain that ended with Deck's death.

"Oh, I wish dad were here!" the girl cried. "He'd know what to do. But no—I'm glad he's not here! Dad's—been sick—for a long time. He's almost—helpless." Lazy had a feeling the girl wanted to say something—to tell him more about her dad, but something tied her tongue. As she finished speaking, she slumped in the big chair before the roll-top desk, her shoulders slumped, and her hands folded wearily in her lap.

Lazy shuffled his feet awkwardly and looked around at Bull as if for help. But the giant was as embarrassed as his partner, and refused to look Lazy in the eye. Lazy got a good grip with both hands on the brim of his Stetson.

"Look—ma'am, me'n Bull, here—well, uh—we ain't got nothing special to do—and—well, Quirt's sort of made it a personal fight between us anyhow—"

The girl smiled at their embarrassment. "You're trying to tell me that you want to help me, aren't you?"

"Aw, we're still after that five thousand," Bull butted in gruffly. "What Lazy means is that—uh—well, it ain't a full-time job—and—"

"You don't have to go on explaining." And for the first time Helen Eldridge smiled at them. She smiled at Bull. He dropped his hat and then stepped on it twice while he fumbled to pick it up. She smiled at Lazy, and he had a funny desire to drag out his harmonica and play her a tune.

"One—no, two more questions, and that'll be all we want to know, Miss Eldridge," Lazy said. "First, does your dad own a high-powered new rifle?"

The girl shook her head. "Dad uses a .30-30—he wouldn't have anything else."

Lazy nodded. "This is the last question—two riders came in just before we arrived. Who were they?"

Helen looked puzzled. "Why, Whitey rode in just before you and Bull—he came in from the north range. There was some

one with him, but I don't know who. What a funny question! Still, if it's important, I can find out."

"Don't bother," Lazy said quickly, moving toward the door, "We'll be leaving."

"I'll tell Grant to give you back your guns," she said. "There he comes now." A heavy tread had sounded outside. Grant entered without knocking.

"I want these men to have their guns back," the girl told him.

"I forbid it!" Grant said sharply. "There'd be trouble among the crew if they were armed."

"Give them back their guns!" the girl ordered, "and I'll talk to any of the crew that doesn't like it!"

Tabor started to protest further, but the girl walked quickly out of the office. The dudish foreman stared hard at her retreating back, then glared savagely at the two partners.

"Come on," he grunted sourly, and led the way to the bunkhouse. Dusk was falling and the bunkhouse was full of riders cleaning up for supper. All talk ceased as the three of them entered, and the whole crew turned hostile eyes on the two partners.

"Helen wants them to have their guns," Tabor said sarcastically. "Whitey, Slag, give 'em to them—but first—take all the ammunition they have. Helen said to give them their guns—but nothing was said about shells."

"Nice hair-splitting," Lazy chuckled. "But what's Miss Eldridge going to say—"

"She isn't going to know it!" Tabor snapped. "Slag, I want you and Whitey to watch these two—and don't let them out of your sight. If they start for the ranchhouse—you know what to do!"

But Grant Tabor was plenty worried. He stood around for a moment, then called Lazy and Bull outside. He motioned for Whitey and Slag to follow, and the pasty-faced gunman tagged along, with drawn gun.

"You're asking too damn many questions!" Tabor told the partners bluntly. "It won't be healthy for you to keep on, understand?"

"I figured you might be listening at the door, while we were talking to the girl," Lazy grinned. "Things are getting ready to happen, Tabor."

"If you're wise, you'll see that no trouble starts on the Eagle Track," Tabor snapped.

He glared at Bull and Lazy a moment, then stalked off.

"Yeah," Whitey said as Tabor got out of earshot, "and the first thing that's going to happen is that you two are going to get measured for a pine box."

"Course, we couldn't prove it," Lazy told Whitey innocently, "that you were mixed up in Deck Lavell's killing—still, there's that trail leading straight—"

"Damn you!" Whitey brought his fist smashing against Lazy's mouth. The tall young rider staggered back from the unexpected blow—staggered back till the muzzle of Slag's gun was boring into his back.

"That's not half what you'll get if you don't keep your mouth shut!" Whitey breathed.

A note of eagerness crept into Slag's voice. "I think we better plant these two right now," he said softly. "Leave it to me I'll—"

"No," Whitey said. "Something raw like that would queer the whole deal right now. The Eldridge girl would notice they were gone and—"

"Tell her they vamoosed, without even saying good-bye," Slag urged. "It's the safest thing. The rest of the men here are beginning to get sort of suspicious, and these two could do too much talking. I tell you, Whitey—"

"It's up to us to see that they don't!" Whitey snarled. "Don't let 'em pass a single word with anybody else!"

"We can't do that forever," Slag argued.

"Won't have to—but see that they don't run their lip till somebody rides over to see the boss."

"That'll be ticklish business. Suppose some of the men find out?"

"Can't be helped," Whitey snapped. "Have one of the boys saddle a horse. If anybody wants to know who's going where, tell 'em Town."

"You better wait till after supper," Slag said. "You can slip away then and nobody'll be the wiser. I tell you the men are beginning to watch us funny, and they wanta know every move we make. We got to be careful!"

"Never mind that," Whitey snarled. "Just do what you're told—keep those two from getting near any of the rest of the men. Whoever rides to see the boss won't leave till the bunkhouse lights go out."

"Okay."

"Mighty interesting conversation," Lazy drawled. "I must remember it and put it in my scrapbook."

Whitey laughed raspingly. "Do you think you'd heard it, if there was a chance of your ever repeating it? C'mon, you two will spend the night in the old bunkhouse. It's a little dirtier—and there's lots of rats—but you'll get used to it."

CHAPTER XXII

The Harmonica Plays Its Part

AFTER a silent meal, which Lazy and Bull, with their two guards, ate separate from the rest of the crew, they moved down to the old bunkhouse.

Whitey left Slag standing guard and he hurried out. He was gone a few minutes.

"Well?" Slag asked when he returned.

"He's going instead of me," Whitey said. "He figured it would be safer for him to go and leave us guarding these two."

Lazy and Bull looked at each other. They could only guess who the mysterious "he" was. But the conversation told them one thing. There were at least three men on the Eagle Track playing Quirt's game, and evidently the "he" Whitey spoke of, was in charge of Whitey and Slag.

Whitey had been right about the condition of the old shack. The place evidently had not been used for a long time, except as a storage place for discarded harness, saddles and other gear. The pack rats were plentiful and bold, and Slag roundly cursed his luck at having to spend the night there. Whitey had brought along a deck of greasy cards and tried to get up a game when he found that Bull possessed a few dollars. He, Slag and Bull squatted around the big packing box that served as a table. Lazy declined to join, and instead, dug out his mouth organ and energetically thumped it against his palm.

"You ain't gonna play that thing!" Bull growled. "I want to concentrate on these cards!"

"Shut up!" Slag ordered. "I like music."

"You mean," Lazy asked eagerly, "that nobody on the place is musically inclined?"

"Aw, Red thumps on a banjo," Slag grunted, "but the thing is out of tune and he can't sing from sour apples."

"Out of tune!" Bull echoed. "Wait'll you hear that!"

Lazy, beaming, ignored his partner's pointed remark. The mouth organ began to wheeze and groan out the bars of "The Face on the Barroom Floor."

The more he played, the louder Lazy played, till the wheezy notes of the harmonica were drifting out the open window and to all the buildings of the ranch.

Bull and Whitey turned their noses up as if smelling something unpleasant, but to Slag's untutored ear it must have sounded all right, as the chunky killer sat out a hand to listen to the doleful whining.

"You're playing too loud," Slag commented. "Blowing too hard makes the thing squeak. Anyhow, that song oughta be played soft."

"So soft you couldn't hear it," Whitey rasped, shuffling the deck.

But Lazy, mindful of the open window, had an excuse. "I got lost in my playing," he said modestly, "and I'm just sort of carried away by my own music."

Bull had unprintable comments to make about the quality of the music, and bold suggestions as to Lazy being carried away with his music. But Slag had turned music critic and wanted to hear more, so Lazy began to render "A Bird in a Gilded Cage" with all the lung-power he could muster. Through the open window, Lazy could see the lights of the main bunkhouse, still blazing brightly.

But cowhands rise early, and except for the nights they spend in town, they are early retirers, and he knew that soon the light would go off, so he wheezed harder and louder.

After what seemed like hours of dreary waiting, some of the lights went off, but one still burned; evidently a small lantern, as some night owl sat up, working on his gear, or perhaps indulging in a game of solitaire. Slag was enjoying the music, and Lazy stood up, strolled to the open window and blew harder.

A few minutes later there was a light step outside, a knock on the door. The two guards were instantly alert, guns half drawn.

"Who is it?"

"Helen Eldridge. Open the door."

Whitey and Slag exchanged quick, puzzled glances, but to Bull, looking hard at his partner, it was no surprise. No woman could stand the noises that had come from Lazy's infernal machine.

Slag cracked the door open slightly. "I

wouldn't come in here, ma'am," he urged. "The place is full of rats."

"That's what I came down for," the girl said. "I heard that awful music and thought it was coming from this old bunkhouse. Who's in there? And who's making that awful sound?"

BULL was glaring triumphantly at Lazy, but Lazy ignored the glare and looked well pleased. Slag shuffled his feet nervously, too slow-witted to think of anything to say. Whitey moved toward the door.

"Ladigan and Jackson are in here with us," Whitey told her.

"Why are you spending the night in this place?" the girl asked suspiciously. "There are plenty of spare bunks in the main bunkhouse."

"That's right," Whitey lied quickly. "But the rest of the boys didn't like the company of Ladigan and Jackson. Grant figured—well, that something might happen during the night—so he put us down here with them."

"I see." But by her tone it was plain that she didn't understand it, and didn't like the situation. Whitey and Slag were both over by the door, and Lazy knew the girl must be standing so she could see into the room. In two long strides—before Slag or Whitey could stop him—Lazy was at the door.

"You said something about some awful noise," Lazy drawled. "Reckon that was me." He was wriggling in between the two guards and to the door. "You're not fond of harmonica music?"

"Well, I had started to bed—" the girl answered falteringly.

"Yes'm, I understand," Lazy said kindly, continuing to wriggle through the door. Suddenly a gun jammed into his back—hard! He threw a quick glance over his shoulder at Bull. The big man was moving swiftly, but before he could take two steps, Whitey's gun swung to cover him. Lazy breathed easier as Whitey's gun muzzle left his back.

"This here mouth organ was slightly out of tune a minute ago," he told the girl pleasantly. Right beside him, Slag moved slightly, and there was a knife blade pricking his ribs. "Some tobacco got in the works." He finished lamely, as the knife point pricked deeper.

"It sounded something like that," the girl agreed hastily.

"But I got it out now," Lazy went on eagerly. The pressure of the knife increased. Lazy threw an imploring look at Bull, but Whitey's Colt was only inches from Bull's head. "Lemme play you a tune—I'll walk back to the house with you and play it on the way—it's 'Turkey in the Straw'—makes you want to shuffle your feet."

"I doubt that—I mean I'm rather tired—but all right. Let's go."

Lazy started to edge through the door. The knife point was buried a quarter of an inch in his skin, and Slag held the blade rock steady. As Lazy moved, he could feel the point cutting. His jaw clamped tightly, and he stepped outside. The knife point did not follow him, but he heard an ominous click as he strolled to the girl's side. His shirt was getting sticky. He caught a snatch of Whitey's whisper.

"—follow him—if he tries to talk—use—your knife!" And then, out loud, Whitey was saying to Bull. "Your deal, Jackson."

There was a prickly sensation along Lazy's spine as he strolled toward the house with Helen Eldridge, blowing and wheezing. Behind him, like a shadow of doom, loomed the squat, powerful Slag, and Lazy had already felt the point of his knife. He was hoping desperately that the girl would hear Slag and turn around, or that Slag would drop far enough behind for him to be out of earshot.

But the night was black with no moon, and Slag stayed close. Lazy was afraid to stop playing, as it would kill his excuse to reach the house. At the front door, Helen paused.

"I got a couple more I could play you," Lazy suggested, trying to keep the eagerness from his voice. "We could go in the living room—"

"Not tonight," the girl said firmly, and stepped inside.

As the door slammed, Lazy sprang far to one side. He caught his breath sharply as something gleamed through the blackness; a dull thud as Slag's blade buried itself in the door jamb. With the coolness that comes to some men as they face death, Lazy gambled that the slow-witted killer wouldn't risk a shot that would wake up the whole ranch. Cat-like, Lazy lit on his toes, whirled and charged.

Head down, feet churning the ground, he rammed straight at the looming shadow

ahead. Coming in low, he was almost upon Slag before the burly killer saw him. Slag grunted; tried to twist away, but Lazy's head caught him square in the midriff.

With an "oof" Slag hit the ground in a sitting position. Lazy's head was ringing from the blow, but he bored in. He swung a knotted brown fist at the gaping face, aiming for the chin. His knuckles connected; and the shock of the blow traveled all the way to his shoulder. Slag sighed and stretched flat on his back.

Lazy fumbled for his gun. But Slag's holster was empty—evidently Slag had been going to risk a shot anyway. Lazy dropped to both knees—feeling for the fallen gun.

"Slag!" Whitey's voice, low and only a few feet away. "Where the hell are you? We got to get back—Jackson might wake up from that tap on the head I gave him—Slag—hey! What's the—Ladigan—damn you—"

BUT Lazy was already on him. He sunk a jarring right into Whitey's stomach, rocked him again with a short left to the face. But Whitey, who looked as if a strong wind would topple him, stayed on his feet. He sagged groggily, but grimly tried to bring his gun into play. Lazy knocked the gun down, it fell from Whitey's nerveless fingers. Lazy started for it, saw Whitey fumbling under his armpit for a hideout, heard Slag mutter as he came to. Lazy whirled and ran for the barn, expecting at any moment to hear the crash of a gun, to feel the sickening slam of a bullet in his back.

But the shot didn't come, and he reached the barn without raising an alarm. The last light in the bunkhouse was out, and save for the weak glimmer from the old bunkhouse, the Eagle Track was in total darkness.

Keeping the barn between him and the ranchhouse, he sprinted toward the old bunkhouse, and took a quick look through the window.

His throat tightened at what he saw, and he bit out a low curse. Bull was slumped over the packing box, a big lump on his head. A thin trickle of blood oozed from the wound. Whitey had wielded his gun barrel with brutal force. He listened carefully, heard nothing and moved swiftly to the front door, which was standing half ajar.

But as he started to push the door open

further, a sound stopped him: shuffling feet in the darkness near by. Whitey was cursing Slag roundly.

"Shut up!" Slag snarled back in a whisper. "You're as much to blame as I am. You let him get out of the bunkhouse with the girl. Anyhow, arguing ain't gonna get us nowhere—let's find him—he'd make for the corral, I tell you!"

"No, he wouldn't," Whitey snapped back. "He'd head back for his partner. We'll trap him when he tries to get back to the bunkhouse—and this time, dammit, don't miss with that knife!"

"We'd better go tell—" Slag started. Lazy strained forward to hear the name of the man Slag was about to mention, the man who was riding to see the boss, but Whitey broke in before Slag finished.

"And give Ladigan a chance to skip," Whitey snarled sarcastically. "C'mon, I'm leery of this Jackson. He might wake up from that tap. We'd better tie him up—then we'll know he's safe. No, we'd better not go in. Listen, you go in and tie him up. Gimme your knife—I'll start scouting for Ladigan."

Lazy faded farther back in the darkness. Slag stepped into the light of the bunkhouse door, and Lazy noted with grim satisfaction that the burly gunman carried a good-sized lump on his jaw. Whitey was still hidden by the darkness. Lazy stopped and searched around on the ground till he found a pebble. He threw it high in the air so it would land on the other side of the bunkhouse. He heard it land with a faint plop and roll a few feet. Instantly, Whitey was moving in that direction, a black blob floating silently through the night, his knife gleaming faintly.

Lazy slipped his boots off and moved toward the barn, boots under his arm. He could still see the dark shadow that was Whitey prowling around the bunkhouse.

The big corral of the Eagle Track was a good distance from the barn, and to reach it, Lazy would have to cross open ground, in plain sight of Whitey. Peering through the darkness, he could still faintly make out the pasty-faced gunman, just a darker shadow, in the dark night.

But if he could see Whitey, Whitey would be able to see him. He felt around for another pebble, with the intention of throwing it behind the barn to draw Whitey there. That would put the barn between them.

And even as his probing fingers searched the ground, he heard the soft beat of a horse dying away in the darkness, and Lazy smiled grimly. The mysterious "he" was riding.

But "he" was riding without the knowledge that Lazy was on the loose, and that meant that "he" would not be suspicious of being followed.

Lazy sprinted for the corral.

CHAPTER XXIII

Two Mysterious Riders

SURPRISINGLY, he reached the bars of the big corral without arousing Whitey. And luck was still with him, for most of the horses had bunched together on the far side of the corral, and Lazy's arrival caused no commotion among the animals.

He searched around on the ground until he had found five or six fair-sized pebbles. The old bunkhouse was hidden by the barn from where he stood, but the light from its half-open door, he could see, and as he watched a shadow moved across the lighted area, as Slag finished tying Bull up and re-joined Whitey.

Lazy drew back his arm and began to throw pebbles. High over the barn he threw them, one after another, and each one a little further to the left than the other; hoping by that method to substitute the sound of a man moving in the darkness, and thus decoy the two stalking guards farther away. His plan succeeded somewhat, as he saw Whitey and Slag follow the sound of the pebbles, then slither away in that direction.

Lazy moved silently along the side of the corral, till he reached the big gate. Hastily, and with no noise, he slid the double bars back and lowered them gently to the ground. He found a bridle hanging near the gate, and whispering soothing words, moved toward the nearest horse. He'd managed to lay a hand on the horse's side, without causing the animal to snort in alarm, when a faint sound came from the old bunkhouse.

Lazy tensed, listening, and then grinned. From the old bunkhouse came steady thumps and bumps, and he could imagine giant Bull Jackson struggling against his bonds. The commotion was all that Lazy needed. He saw Whitey and Slag hurry

toward the bunkhouse, slipped the bridle on his horse and led it out of the corral. He even took time to replace the bars, and then keeping the barn between him and his stalkers, led his horse.

A good long distance from the buildings, he stopped and mounted. For a while he walked his mount to keep down noise, and a good safe distance from the Eagle Track he thumped his stockinged feet against his mount's ribs and galloped toward the Cross Bar H.

Riding toward Quirt Magurn's stronghold was only a hunch, but by now the mysterious "he" was far ahead, and he couldn't risk striking matches to find his trail. He had a hunch, though, that Magurn was the boss, and he played it.

As he topped each rise of ground, he peered ahead for a sight of the rider, but evidently the man was riding fast, for he never caught up with him. The sharp back of his mount began to make him sore, and he heaved a sigh of relief when the twinkling lights of the Cross Bar H showed in the distance.

He slowed down, then stopped quickly and grabbed his horse's nostrils, as a rider was silhouetted between him and the lights of the ranch. He eased behind a clump of brush, to plan a course of action. The rider melted into the darkness toward the ranch, but his appearance was a grim warning that to approach the Cross Bar H would be dangerous.

"Still," he muttered, "there ain't no other way to find out what Quirt is planning, but to go up and try to listen. I just got me a hunch that if I could overhear Quirt Magurn and his visitor talk for about three minutes, it would clear up this whole case, and it's worth a try."

He slid to the ground and rubbed the seat of his pants tenderly. Ground-tying his horse behind the clump of brush, out of sight, he slipped his boots on.

"And now for a good, hefty rock to caress the skull of the first Cross Bar H gent that—"

HE froze, listening, then sprang to his feet. A horse was coming—from the direction of the Eagle Track—and it was coming fast!

"Whitey or Slag," he muttered.

Lazy was only a few feet from the trail, and now he ran back to it, as the horse pounded nearer.

"Just hope it's Whitey," he muttered as he crouched beside the trail, ready for a spring.

But it wasn't—even in the darkness, he recognized the chunky form of Slag. The gunman was hunched low in the saddle, using his quirt relentlessly for more speed. Lazy dug his toes in the ground, gauged Slag's distance in the tricky darkness.

He hit Slag on the shoulder, and for a moment fought wildly to get a good hold on the man in the saddle. Slag cursed in wild surprise; his mount snorted in alarm and jumped sideways, almost unseating the burly gunman. Lazy's right hand was clamped on the saddle horn, and his left closed for a grip on Slag.

Wild-eyed with terror, Slag's horse went to bucking. Slag was reaching for his Colt, but as his mount pitched viciously, he grabbed for leather. Lazy got a grip on the other's collar. Grimly, he dug his heels in the dirt. The horse was bucking and jumping and his wild leaps dragged Lazy along.

At each jump, he felt as if his arms were going to be jerked from their sockets, but he felt Slag slipping. Then the horse went high into the air, sunfishing. Slag grunted as his hand slipped, and Lazy's knees, bumping against his leg, caused him to lose a stirrup.

The two of them hit the ground in a rolling, kicking, clawing mass. Lazy pumped vicious short rights into Slag's face as they rolled, then his feet felt the ground again, he kicked hard and broke loose. Slag rolled to his feet like a steel spring rebounding.

His gun was in the dirt between them and Slag dived for it. Lazy saw he couldn't beat the gunman to it, but he drew back one long leg and kicked. The Colt slithered away in the darkness, from under Slag's groping hand.

"Oh, so that's the way you want it, huh?" Slag was crouched on one knee, his beefy face twisted in a sneer. "I'll snap that damn skinny spine of your'n like a matchstick!"

Lazy stepped back warily, watching for Slag's knife; and for an opening to carry the fight to the killer. Slag sneered and rubbed the knuckles of one fist.

"Kinda smart of you, tolling the Eldridge girl to the bunkhouse so's you could git out," Slag sneered. "I hate smart people."

"Dumb people usually do," Lazy drawled sarcastically.

"Why, you—" Slag charged blindly, throwing caution aside in his rage at Lazy's contemptuous tone.

Lazy stepped nimbly aside, drew blood from Slag's lips with a short chop as the burly killer plunged by, great arms flailing the empty air.

"Don't ever let him get those arms around you," Lazy was telling himself. "Stay away from him—sass him—taunt him—keep him mad enough not to use his head." He'd found Slag's weak spot—the killer couldn't stand ridicule and sarcasm.

Slag pawed to a stop, whirled clumsily. Shoulders hunched, fists dangling, he glared at Lazy.

"See?" Lazy taunted. "Shows how dumb you are—nobody but a fool would try to rush a long-legged galoot like me!"

Slag made a sound that was almost a scream. Overwhelmed by his rage at this cool, lanky devil, the stocky killer charged again, head down, powerful legs driving the dirt, arms punching forward like pistons. Lazy pivoted on his toes, drove two stiff jabs at Slag's face—striving for that lump on Slag's jaw. But Slag kept coming and Lazy steadily gave ground, feinting, jabbing and hooking short jolts into the killer's face and head. Lazy whirled aside again, and once more Slag's momentum was too great.

Like a striking cougar, Lazy followed his advantage, stepped close to Slag and waited for him to turn. Drove a straight-arm jolt square at Slag's jaw. The gun guard moaned as Lazy's fist connected with the lump on his jaw; his knees sagged, and for a moment his guard dropped. Lazy bored in, recklessly, for the kill.

He came within range of Slag's arms; saw he'd been tricked. Slag rumbled an animal growl of pleasure as he slammed against Lazy, locking his arms around his slimmer opponent.

LAZY wriggled and twisted, but he felt Slag's arms complete their circle and lock at his back, then the pressure started. He kept slamming blows at Slag's face, but Slag shook them off, gibbering in glee as his arms continued to crush. Bright spots were floating in front of Lazy's eyes, growing brighter and brighter, then exploding and shooting fiery sparks into space.

He got one foot firmly against the ground; pushed with all his remaining strength and they rolled over, Slag on the bottom. As they rolled, Slag's head was

twisted aside for a moment. Through a red haze Lazy saw his opening, jabbed an elbow into the killer's windpipe. Slag gagged, rolled his head desperately to free his wind, but Lazy held on grimly. He felt the guard's crushing hold relax slightly, as Slag began to pay more attention to getting his wind than keeping his hold. In a last desperate effort, Lazy increased his pressure; Slag relaxed his grip for a second to jerk away that elbow that was throttling him, and Lazy broke free.

Their breath was coming in great sobbing gasps as they rolled to their feet again. The numbness was leaving Lazy's body—to be replaced by a thousand needles of pain. Every breath was torture to draw in; more torture not to. Slag showed no intention of rushing him again.

"Shows how dumb—you are—" Lazy gasped between sobs. "I was done for—and you let me go—"

Slag rose to the bait, charged. Lazy swung; felt his whole body jar as his knuckles caught Slag on the jaw. This time Slag was down—on one knee. Half-out, the killer staggered to his feet, and Lazy swung again. Slag moaned softly, his big fists moved aimlessly once or twice, then he dived face first into the dirt.

Lazy stretched flat on his back on the cool ground, drawing in huge draughts of air, letting them out slowly till the mad pounding of his heart ceased and strength flowed back into his lanky, rawhide-tough body.

Faint, distant voices roused him. He sat up quickly, twisting his head to make out the direction from which they came; and was instantly alert as he realized they came from the direction of the Cross Bar H. Two riders were coming up the trail; would pass right by him.

Crouching, to keep from skylighting himself, he dragged Slag into the clump of brush where his horse was, caught up Slag's mount and brought him over. The horse-men were getting close before he'd finished, and Slag was beginning to moan and fret as he regained consciousness.

Lazy twisted the reins about the two horses' noses to keep them from whinnying at the approaching animals, then knelt by Slag.

"Somebody's coming, Slag," he said softly, and laid his hand on the man's neck. "I can feel you start to yell, hombre. If you

try it, I'll shut more than your yell off, permanent."

THE killer's eyes opened wide, but he made no effort to cry out, as the voices came closer. The night was black indeed, and he could not recognize the riders. The soft night wind muffled their words somewhat. To Lazy, straining to hear, it was maddening, because both voices were familiar, yet muffled too effectively to make them out.

One man was speaking. Lazy caught the words. The speaker sounded worried, then the other man answered him.

"What could go wrong?" he asked. "It's a neat idea—and all over quick like."

"Yeah," came the muttered answer, "but there'd be talk."

"There's always talk!" the other snapped back. "What good will it do anybody to talk—with me rodding the law—they can't prove nothing."

"Maybe you're right," the first agreed.

"Of course I'm right," the other chuckled. They were opposite Lazy now, and he crouched deeper behind the brush. And as yet, he hadn't been able to place the two, but recognition, he knew, would come swiftly, if he ever heard the voices again.

"And the slick part of the plan is," the man was going on, "there won't be no trial. We'll just call Eldridge guilty and already punished, all in one quick stroke—it's a natural!"

"All right," the voices were fading into the distance and the words came faintly, "I'm for it."

"That's better," the other man said heartily. "You let me know the minute you hear anything." Lazy heard them separate, the stranger riding toward Town.

"Who were they, Slag?" Lazy asked grimly. The gunman sneered. "All right, Slag," Lazy said grimly. "You're going out of circulation for a while." He rolled the gunman over, planted his knee firmly in his back and tied him up with the lasso rope from Slag's own mount.

CHAPTER XXIV

Tink Doss Gets a Message

IT STILL lacked some time until dawn when Lazy rode close to the Eagle Track and dismounted. He slipped the bridles from both horses, con-

fident that they would head straight for their home corral, and traveled the rest of the way on foot.

He was sleepy, and the long strenuous hours behind him were beginning to draw heavily on his reserve strength. His wiry body slumped as he trudged along, but as the buildings of the ranch loomed ahead, he once more became wary and alert. He skirted the main buildings and approached the old bunkhouse cautiously. A dull yellow light still streamed through the window. He edged closer, and peered through.

Bull was stretched out on his bunk, sound asleep. A bloody bandage was wrapped around his head, and the big man slept peacefully. Apparently, the bunkhouse held only Bull. Lazy started to move toward the door, then stopped.

Whitey left his chair in a corner. Catlike, the pasty-faced killer moved to the front door, cracked it a few inches and peered anxiously into the night. Cursing under his breath, he treaded nervously back to his chair.

Lazy noted that the gunman had not slammed the door hard enough—the latch had failed to catch. He eased around the corner, palmed his gun and kicked the door wide.

"Sit still, Whitey"—Slag had plenty of ammunition—"this Colt's loaded."

Whitey eased back into his chair, his hand jerking nervously away from his gun.

"Where's Slag?"

"Never mind. Stand up and shuck your guns."

Face immobile, Whitey got to his feet, his long white fingers fumbled with the belt buckle.

"Leave your guns on, Whitey," Grant Tabor said from the doorway. "Drop your gun, Ladigan, before I kill you!" His voice was high-pitched and nervous. "What the hell went on here last night?" the foreman snapped. "Where's Slag?"

Lazy shoved his long arms into the air. "Reckon it wasn't my turn to deal after all," he drawled.

"Ladigan tried to get away last night," Whitey explained. "Slag went after him." His pale eyes were burning murderously. "Ladigan came back, but Slag didn't."

"I knew there'd be trouble!" Tabor growled. A look of cruel cunning spread over his weak features. "You two signed your death warrant by coming out here and starting trouble, Ladigan."

"You're signing your own death warrant, fooling around with that trigger thataway!"

Bull Jackson's voice brought instant silence.

"You heard me, Tabor," the giant rumbled on. "I'll drive this knife clean through you—drop that gun!"

Lazy had continued to stare at Whitey. "Let's have that gun, Whitey." And without turning his head. "Where'd you get a knife, Bull?"

"Slag dropped it. He was excited and didn't notice."

"What have you done with Slag?" Tabor asked. The foreman was white-faced with fear, as he carefully laid his gun on the packing box table.

Bull slid out of his bunk and scooped it up. "Yeah, what'd you find out? And where do we go from here?"

"Ain't just sure yet where we go from here," Lazy answered. "As for Slag—he's tied up in a neat bundle—hoping and praying that I won't stop no lead, so's I can come back and loose him."

"You mean you didn't find anything?"

Bull snapped. "Where you been, joyriding in the moonlight!"

"I found out plenty," Lazy said. "But I got to know more before the pieces of my jigsaw fit together." He snapped his fingers. "I got it. Tink Doss, that's one of those hombres I saw last night. Yeah—he said something about rodding the law! It was Tink all right!"

"Always talking in riddles!" Bull snorted in disgust. "What I want to know is what do we do now."

LAZY thought for a moment. "Here's the play, Bull. Last night that gent that left here, and Doss and Quirt cooked up some swell scheme. Whatever it is—Tink Doss is the one that actually does the work—and he starts the minute he gets word from the hombre I trailed last night—the man who left here. Thing we got to do is send word to Tink to go ahead—and—"

"Be Johnny-on-the-spot to see that he don't," Bull finished. "Sounds easy. Here's plenty of rope—what I was tied up with—we'll wind it around these two and then get moving."

So engrossed were they in trussing up their captives, that Lazy did not notice the door open until he felt a draft on his back. He whirled around, Colt cocked and lifting.

Helen Eldridge was standing in the doorway, her absurd little .32 held firmly.

"What's going on here?" she demanded. "Why are you tying Grant and Whitey?"

"I'll explain the whole thing," Lazy said.

"And what went on at this ranch last night?" the girl demanded. "There were people moving around all night—I couldn't see, but I could feel it!"

"Me, too."

The big puncher known as Red had appeared behind the girl, looking as if he'd hastily donned his clothes. He carried his gunbelt and holster in his left hand. His right hand was Colt-filled.

"There was a lot of shenanigans going on—no noise, but three horses left here last night. Only one came back." He was looking suspiciously at Lazy and Bull.

"I'll tell you what went on," Tabor snarled. "Red, untie me!"

Lazy turned to the girl. "I think it would be best to leave them two tied up, ma'am."

"Don't listen to him, Helen!" Grant Tabor said. "Are you going to leave me a prisoner, right here on my own ranch? Wait till I tell you what went on last night, Red, untie me!"

Two or three more cowhands from the main bunkhouse had arrived and were filling the doorway. Like Red, they had guns ready, and like Red, they eyed Lazy and Bull with open hostility.

The big redheaded puncher stepped over to his boss and quickly loosed the bonds. Tabor stood up, chafing his wrists to restore circulation. With obvious distaste, Red jerked at the knots that held Whitey.

"Here's what happened," Tabor told Helen. "Slag overheard these two planning something—he couldn't hear what. But I thought it best to put them under guard last night. But you spoiled the whole thing by coming to the bunkhouse last night and letting Ladigan walk back to the house with you."

"Let me put in my two cents," Lazy cut in.

"Shut up," Red told him shortly.

"Ladigan got away," Tabor went on quickly. "Slugged Slag and got a horse. Slag chased him. Ladigan's back, but Slag isn't. Evidently, Ladigan led Slag to Magurn's men—"

"That's a lie," Lazy said softly.

"Shut up!" Tabor yelled, and sprang forward. His fist smashed against Lazy's lips.

"If I'm lying, then where's Slag? Why isn't he here?"

"Yeah, where's Slag?" Whitey cut in, cool as ice. "He's out there on the trail somewhere, dead—'cause he heard and saw too much."

"Slag's plenty alive," Lazy said, licking away the salty taste from his cut lip. "That's easy enough proved—I'll take you to him."

"You won't get a chance!" Grant Tabor snarled. "You're staying right here—under guard—till I get this thing cleared up." He turned to Helen. "I don't know what Ladigan's game is, Helen—but you were right, Magurn's at the bottom of the trouble around here—and these two are in his pay! There's some dirty work going to happen—and I'm going to keep these two under close guard till I break it up!"

THE girl sat down on the edge of a bunk, her small shoulders sagging wearily. "I don't know what to do," she said in a small voice. "I—I guess you'd better do what you think is best, Grant, till dad gets home, anyway."

She got up and moved toward the door. "Dad'll be home today—I got a letter day before yesterday. Maybe he'll know how to straighten things out—I have a feeling that some awful—dreadful thing is going to happen—and there's no way to stop it!"

"Everything's going to be all right, Helen," Tabor said soothingly. "You go back to the house and see if you can't get some rest." And then, as she moved away, "Are you sure the boss is coming home today?"

The girl didn't say any more, only nodded and left. Red sighed gustily.

"I'll be glad to see the old man," he muttered.

"Tie these two up," Tabor said. "I'm going to the house—I want to see Helen a minute."

Lazy counted the odds against him, as the cowhands of the Eagle Track watched him silently. He knew he could drop a few of them before they got him—but what good would that do? It was Whitey who settled it.

"Shuck your guns, you two!" he rasped. "Or I'll blow Jackson's head clean off." The little killer had maneuvered to a position directly behind Bull, and now held his gun muzzle close to Bull's head. Lazy sighed and sat down.

Expert hands bound him and Bull tightly

to the two rickety chairs. When they had finished, Whitey waved the others outside.

"Slag was my sidekick," he explained. "And I'm gonna make this Ladigan tell me where he left him!" He smiled thinly and picked up Slag's knife.

"Okay, Ladigan, are you talking easy, or do I have to coax you?"

"Reckon you better start coaxing," Lazy said grimly.

"It'll be a pleasure," Whitey sneered, and began to build a fire in the little heating stove. "I seen the Mexicans use a red hot knife on a fellow once—wasn't a pretty sight."

"Gwan, tell him," Bull grunted. "What difference does it make?"

"All right, Whitey. No need to heat the knife," Lazy drawled.

"Maybe I'll go ahead and heat it anyhow," Whitey leered, and began to shove more wood into the stove.

The big cowhand called Red came in before the little killer was able to heat the knife to his satisfaction.

"You're wanted at the bunkhouse," Red grunted, and both of them left.

The two partners instantly began to twist at their bonds, but Whitey was only gone a few minutes. There was a triumphant leer on his face.

"I just came back to tell you," Whitey snarled, "that while I'm gone you can tell one of the boys where you left Slag, so's he can go out and get him. You'd better do it," he ground out, "because if you don't—I'll use that knife anyhow—when I get back!"

"Where you going?" Lazy asked.

Whitey leered. "I'm going to Town. I got a message to deliver to Tink Doss!" He favored the two with a long look, then smiled.

"By tonight," he said softly, "Quirt Magurn and us will have this whole damn Valley under our thumbs—and the first little chore we'll do will be to string you two up! Adios!"

CHAPTER XXV

Lazy Gets Away

"WHAT'D he mean by that crack?" Bull grunted.

"Plenty," Lazy said grimly. "We got to get out of here fast."

"Yeah, I heard that hanging talk, too," Bull snapped.

"What I'm thinking about is more important."

"More important than getting hung?" Bull asked. "What in thunder are you thinking?"

Lazy strained mightily at the ropes that held his wrists to the back of the chair, his face red and sweaty from the exertion. He stopped, caught his breath.

"Tink Doss is going to kill Henry Eldridge."

"Are you just thinking up that kind of stories—or do you know?"

"Can't be sure, but I'd bet a month's pay—if I had a job—that's what's going to happen. Quick, I'll tell you before some hombre walks in to see if we're still tied tight."

Quickly he outlined the snatch of conversation he'd overheard between the two horsemen the night before.

"And the minute the news was out that Eldridge was on his way home, Whitey takes word to Tink, telling Tink he can meet the old man on the other side of the Notch."

Bull wrinkled his brow. "Not that I'd put it past these skunks—I mean killing Eldridge—but what good will that do 'em?"

Lazy didn't reply for a moment. He was half twisted in his chair in an effort to get a finger-hold on one of his knots. But the effort of bending his hands—tightly bound as they were—caused a cramp, and he had to quit.

"I'll explain it—as long as Eldridge is alive, he'll always be hunting the killer of Hawkins. Whoever killed Hawkins knew that, and in killing Hawkins, tried to plant suspicion on Eldridge—maybe they didn't hope that Eldridge would be convicted, only hoped that with suspicion on Eldridge, then Eldridge himself would give up the chase."

"And we—or me—stumbled right on the clue this killer—or killers—planted," Bull supplied.

"Exactly—and since an outsider—somebody not connected with the Valley—accused Eldridge, it made the case against him stronger, since people would figure there was nothing personal in the accusation, coming from somebody like you, who was only after the reward."

"That still don't explain why they're killing him."

"They're going to finish the whole case right now," Lazy went on. "Keep twisting at them ropes. Way I figure it, Tink's going to kill the old man in cold blood out on the trail."

"Yeah," Bull said, "I get it. Then he just moseys back to town—spins a yarn that Eldridge tried to resist arrest—which—so Tink will claim—proved the old man guilty, and that's the end of the case."

Bull was silent a minute as he twisted at his ropes. "What about Langstrom. He won't stand for nothing raw like that."

"Tink said something last night about rodding the law—I got a hunch Langstrom's slated for the same kind of party they're giving Eldridge. Tink's the only deputy."

"Quirt will just keep the Cross Bar H and have the whole Valley under his thumb."

"Keep twisting!" Lazy growled.

Both partners were breathing hard from their exertion when the big cowpuncher called Red entered.

"Trying to wriggle loose, huh?" he said. "Save your strength—somebody's going to stay right by you all day long. I'm taking the first watch."

"Thought you'd be at work," Lazy remarked.

"I reckon you hoped I'd be," Red answered sarcastically. "I'll just tie them long legs of yours up tight again. Must've been doing some spy kicking to get 'em that loose."

"Not me," Lazy grinned innocently. "The hombre that tied me up was just lazy."

"That's a lie," Red grunted. "Tied you myself. I'll bet this time you don't wriggle 'em loose."

He bent over, untied the double knot that held Lazy's legs, shook the rope out to do the job all over again. Lazy's legs felt numb from the stopping of circulation. He moved one a trifle—it was sluggish. Red bent over.

LAZY kicked; straight for the jaw. His boot toe caught the puncher flush on the chin, but the kick was weak. Red staggered back, eyes blazing, then doubled his fist for a swing at the helpless Lazy.

The lanky one's long legs shot out, snapped around Red's middle, and locked into place in a crushing scissors hold. Red's breath left him in a gasp. He swung at

Lazy's jaw, but the long legs were holding him at a safe distance; he twisted to try to free himself from that crushing coil. Lazy put on more pressure.

"You damn idjit—" Red gasped. "Turn loose—maybe a Colt—"

His right arm was held in the punishing scissors hold; Red twisted awkwardly, reaching for his gun with his left hand.

Lazy threw his whole weight sideways, tilting his chair off-balance, jerking his legs in a twisting motion at the same time. The move caught Red unguarded. He strove to keep his balance; then he and Lazy fell sideways to the floor. Red fell on his right side, trapping his left hand under his body. There was a dull crunch of a bone giving away and the big puncher sagged limply in pain.

"Bull! Tilt yourself backwards—your hands—loose enough—get his throat—"

Bull's toes could barely wriggle, but they wriggled enough to send him over backwards. He could still flex his mighty hands, as the ropes were around his wrists. He wriggled and "rocked" his chair till one groping hand closed over Red's windpipe; his strong fingers closing off Red's breathing.

"Red," Lazy said softly. "You listening?"

Red renewed his struggle, but his left arm was dangling helplessly at his side, and with a twist motion, Lazy got the arm in his scissors hold, but he relaxed the pressure.

"You're in a tight fix, Red," Lazy snapped. "If I clamp down on that arm—you'll faint from pain—while you're out Bull can shut your wind off for good. Ready to play our way—and don't try for your gun!"

The big redhead's right hand was slipping toward his holstered Colt. Lazy clamped on the pressure. Red moaned in pain, his right hand involuntarily shot over to soothe his broken left arm.

Lazy slipped his leg till it covered the butt of Red's Colt—the big puncher would have to dislodge the leg to get his gun—and if Lazy applied pressure to the gun—Red's broken arm would suffer.

"Get your knife out, Red, and start cutting!"

The big redhead shook his head, though big drops of pain sweat were standing out on his forehead.

"I ain't enjoying this, Red," Lazy said, "but I'll keep it up till you get that knife

out!" He applied pressure. Red gasped—and fumbled in his pocket for his knife.

"We ain't out of the woods yet," Bull growled, as he shook loose the last coil of his bonds and stole a look through the window. "The place is alive with men—looks like about half of them stuck close to the house today."

Lazy was busy tying Red up. He'd rolled the man onto a bunk and lashed both feet and his right arm. The broken left arm he stretched out as comfortably as he could on the bunk. He finished and joined Bull at the window.

"And any minute some hombre might mosey down this way to see how Red's getting along," he drawled. He measured the distance to the corral with his eye. "Never knew it was so far."

Bull shook his head. "Five men in sight—maybe more we can't see. They'd cut you to ribbons with Colt lead before you got halfway to the corral—to say nothing of catching a cayuse and fogging out of here."

Lazy prowled nervously around the old bunkhouse. Already, he figured, it had been a good two hours since Whitey had left. That meant if Whitey had been able to find Tink Doss immediately, Tink had a big lead already, and it was getting bigger by the minute. He kicked at a loose board in the back wall of the bunkhouse, then prowled up front again.

"I been watching," Bull said. "Every now and then there's a little cloud of dust drifts around the barn. I think somebody's got a horse tied at the corral, just out of sight from here—probably already saddled. It cuts down the odds some."

"It'll have to be enough," Lazy said soberly. "Never was much of a hand to set by and see an old man murdered without a chance. Here, you take the gun."

"This is the only gun we got," Bull reminded him. "How you figure to stop Tink?"

"Dunno," Lazy said. He walked back and kicked the loose board. It became more loose. He kicked again, and it sagged even more.

BULL muttered a curse and walked back.

"What you trying to do—bring the whole crew down here? Lemme at it—watch the front." He dropped to one knee, grabbed the board and twisted easily. The nails drew out with only a slight squeak, leaving

an opening large enough for the slim, lanky, Lazy to slide through.

"How you going to play it?" Bull asked.

"Slide out the back and make a wide circle for the barn," Lazy was already shoving his feet through the opening. "Think I can almost reach it—if I make a big enough circle without being seen. When I get there, start shooting. That'll bring 'em quick, I'll sprint for that cayuse."

"Better take the gun and let me just hold," Bull said.

Lazy shook his head. "You'll need it—plenty." He stopped, halfway through the opening. "I'm leaving you in a bad tight, Bull," he mumbled, embarrassed. "Reckon you know what these hombres would do—if they could drag you outta here."

"That'd be quite a job," Bull murmured.

"Say the word and we'll rip another board off and both vamoose. We could be a mile away from here on foot before they knew we were gone."

"We'd never stop Tink on foot," Bull answered. "What would happen to old man Eldridge?"

Lazy nodded and pushed himself through the opening. On all fours he dropped straight back fifty yards or more from the bunkhouse, then moved cautiously toward the barn.

"Yeee-owwww-ee! You cross-eyed, snaggle-toothed hairpins! I'm wild, and getting wilder!" Bull's roar rolled across the Eagle Track like a sudden clap of thunder. He punctuated his yells with crashing blasts from the Colt. He squawled out his defiance to the whole world in general and the good-for-nothing, ring-boned, spavined bohunks that loafed on the Eagle Track in particular.

Lazy hugged the side of the barn, as excited curses, yells and a few scattering shots broke from the Eagle Track men. Then running feet pounded close by—a cowhand raced past the barn, blazing away at the old bunkhouse. Another. Another and still more. Lazy sprinted.

He almost collided with a man as he rounded the corner of the barn. The puncher stared in surprise, his Winchester held awkwardly in front of him. Lazy picked a long right up from the ground, slammed it against the surprised man's jaw, then stepped over him.

There was a horse already saddled—three of them, in fact. Lazy raced for the

one that looked the fastest; a big black he'd seen Tabor riding, and climbed aboard.

Bull was still roaring defiance and thundering shots at the Eagle Track men, and not a hand was lifted to stay Lazy, as he swept across the Valley floor toward Town.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Fight at the Notch

HE FELT considerably elated over having gotten away from the Eagle Track with no trouble.

Still, if pursuit did start, he'd be plenty helpless with no gun. Nervously, he watched his back trail till a slight swell in the ground hid the ranch. Faintly, now, he could hear Bull, still shooting and yelling.

"Hope the old son doesn't use up all the Colt fodder he's got," Lazy muttered. "He'll need it plenty if they try to rush that bunkhouse." He laid low across his mount's neck, face grim for a moment, then he brightened, almost smiled. "On the other hand, I never knew many situations that Mister Francis Periwinkle Jackson couldn't handle. Bull can take care of himself."

The shortest way to the Notch led close to the Cross Bar H, but Lazy decided to risk it. Already, if Whitey had found Tink quickly, the crooked deputy had far too great a start, and Lazy reasoned that one rider, riding by fast, would cause little comment on Quirt's bailiwick.

He was right. As he passed the Cross Bar H, he saw a couple of men stop and watch him a moment, then go on about their business. He was too far away to recognize them, and that, he reasoned, worked both ways.

"Now the only problem I got facing me is how to stop Tink with no gun—I feel like I'm naked—with no Colt." His only weapon was Red's pocket knife, and even had it been a sheath knife, Lazy couldn't throw a knife ten feet with any accuracy.

"But that's a bridge that can be crossed when we get to it," he mumbled, and promptly forgot it.

He reached the mountain trail leading to the North without sighting another rider, although he stood up in his stirrups for a good look toward town, and searched the trail winding upward toward the Notch.

"Nary a soul—and that's strange. Or, is it? Hmmm, I wouldn't put it past Quirt to see to it that nobody was riding around to-

day, that might witness something they shouldn't. Well, either I'm away ahead of Tink—or he's away ahead of me. And I'm afraid it's the last."

To make better time in the long run, he pulled to a stop at the base of the mountain and let his horse catch its wind. When he did start upward, it was at a rather slow pace, but the horse held it doggedly. Lazy was studying signs.

"Horse went up this trail not long ago," he muttered, noting tracks and loose pebbles. "Was traveling fast, too, to be going uphill. Here we are!"

There was a plain sign on the trail where a horse had stopped to blow. Foam, which had probably dropped from the animal's bridle, was bubbly on the rocks of the trail.

"Pushed his mount too fast upgrade," Lazy mused. "Poor critter was almost ready to cave in when he stopped here. There's two cigarette butts here, meaning that Tink had to wait a long time for his horse to catch its wind, but the horse itself didn't move around much, judging by the scuffed-up dirt. Too tired, probably."

He swung quickly out of the saddle and picked up each cigarette butt. One of them was still slightly warm.

The breather at the foot of the mountain had put new life into his own horse, and it could deliver the greater speed that Lazy asked of it.

"If I read signs correct," Lazy mused, as the Notch itself came in sight above, "Tink got a slow start. Maybe Whitey couldn't locate him quick. Then Tink danged near killed his horse, trying to make up time—and consequently, with his horse winded, will be slower'n ever, now."

He pulled to a stop at the Notch, keen eyes sweeping the winding trail that led downward. Parts of the trail he could see; the forest cut the rest from view. There was no one in sight, as he put spurs to his mount and started recklessly down.

Sweeping around a wide bend, a quarter of a mile down Lazy saw a lone rider. He hauled to a sliding stop and studied the tiny speck in the distance. There was no doubt of it; that rider was coming uptrail!

And then he sighted another rider, this one going down. The two were still a mile apart, but the man going down was going fast!

Grimly, Lazy gave the spurs to his horse, leaned forward and slipped his feet almost free from his stirrups, so they wouldn't

hang should his horse stumble. A bend in the trail hid the two riders. When they reappeared, he noticed Tink had gained on him, but then an almost straight stretch of trail appeared and he made up the loss.

Another bend, and again he was out of sight. This bend, he knew, would put him close to Tink, maybe within yelling distance of Henry Eldridge. His mount leaned low as he pounded around a sharp turn, into sight once more.

A puff of smoke blossomed from Tink Doss; something shrilled past Lazy's ear, then came the boom of Tink's gun. Lazy sawed at the reins, searching the sides of the trail for a spot to ride off into cover. But on one side was a sheer drop straight down the mountain; the other side a perpendicular wall.

ANOTHER puff of smoke. Lazy's horse squealed and jerked, pawed forward a stride and faltered. Lazy kicked free of his stirrups, sailed through the air, and hit, rolling, on one shoulder.

He lay face down on the hard surface of the trail, watching Tink's next action in a stunned, dreamy way. Tink pulled off the trail, quickly dismounted and rested his rifle across his saddle, pointing down trail!

Lazy could see Henry Eldridge plainly. At the first two shots, Eldridge had stopped, and now he was riding forward again. Tink was only partly off the trail, and was making no effort to conceal his intentions. And yet Eldridge rode steadily on!

Lazy was getting his knees under him, trying to get to his feet.

"Why, you poor idjit, are you blind? Blind!"

And then Lazy was on his feet, racing down the trail.

"Eldridge! Watch! Duck! Murder!"

Tink's rifle spat. The man on the horse jerked taut, hands groping aimlessly for the saddle horn. He reeled once, steadied himself, then slid out of the saddle. Only once did he move, then lay still on the ground.

Lazy was still running. Tink whirled and snapped a shot at him. The bullet zinged overhead. He whipped two more quick shots. Tink was weaving now as he ran, and the slugs whirled harmlessly past.

Tink cursed, high-pitched and nervous. He dropped the rifle, dragged his Colt. The deputy was too anxious to finish the job.

His first shot with the short gun plowed dirt at Lazy's pounding feet.

Then Tink steadied himself, taking time to aim for an accurate shot. To the right of the trail rose the mountain, steep and brush-tangled. Lazy sprang sideways, grabbed brush and clawed his way upward. Tink's lead kicked dirt and rock into his face.

The brush was heavy and tangled. Tink was taking time to aim now. He'd not miss any more, Lazy fell flat in the brush, loosed his grip and allowed himself to slide back down a few feet. Tink slammed two shots into the space where Lazy had fallen, and then came the click of a loading gate as the deputy feverishly reloaded.

Lazy pressed hard against the ground, not daring to raise up, for fear of showing himself. He heard the loading gate click shut, heard Tink cursing in a steady, low monotone.

"Come on out, Ladigan!" Tink yelled. "Shoot it out fair and square! C'mon, show yourself!" He attached a blistering string of profanity to the end of his invitation.

Lazy wriggled around slightly and parted the brush, peering through. "Yeah, fair and square," he muttered. Only Tink's hat-brim and gun muzzle showed from behind the tree.

"Hey, Ladigan!" Tink waited a moment, then became a little bolder, and peeped from around the tree. Since no shot came, he showed a little more of himself. Lazy felt clammy all over, knowing it wouldn't be long before Tink discovered he had no gun.

"Ladigan!" Tink was in plain view now. Lazy gripped the two rocks he'd picked up—his only weapons. Slowly, cautiously, Tink was advancing. Halfway there, he stopped, carefully sighted at the place he'd last seen Lazy and fired a shot. Instantly, another gun roared.

Eldridge!

The deputy whirled around, spitting profanity. Eldridge was up on one elbow, but sagging back to the ground.

"Hard to kill, huh?" Tink ground out, and raised his Colt.

Lazy leaped to his feet. "Tink!"

The deputy whirled. Lazy let the rock fly. It caught Tink over one eye, half spun him around. Lazy came down the bank in three long leaps. His third leap carried him halfway to Tink; he was in mid-air when he crashed into the deputy, both fists pounding like triphammers.

Tink's gun roared once, then spun out of his hand and clattered over the edge of the trail down the steep bank. The deputy side-stepped, and Lazy's powerful momentum carried him past in a rush. He tried to stop his headlong dash, stumbled and went to his knees.

Tink spotted Lazy's empty holster, and raced back to his horse and the fallen Winchester. Lazy fell flat as Tink pulled the trigger, then rolled over the edge of the trail as the deputy levered out the empty.

Tink's Colt glinted brightly in the tangled brush ten feet downward. Lazy kept on rolling, then his hands closed over the butt.

He came up shooting. Tink was running toward him, firing his rifle from the hip. Lazy's first shot jerked his hat off. His second knocked dust from his pants leg. Tink went down on one knee, his rifle still spitting.

Something fiery slammed against Lazy's ribs; stunned him. He felt sick, and so weak that the Colt seemed to drag his hand down. The hammer seemed to weigh a ton; the gun bucked out of his hand as he let it fall.

His last shot bored a round blue hole in the center of Tink's forehead.

Lazy wiped blood from his brush-scratched face; pressed a hand to his ribs. It came away bloody. Fiery sparks shot through his torso when he drew a breath. He walked down to Eldridge. The rancher lay very still, face down. One arm was stretched out in front of him, his Colt a few inches away.

Gently, Lazy rolled the old man over, and looked into a pair of pain-filled eyes.

"You must be Ladigan," Eldridge whispered. "I recognized Tink's voice yelling at Ladigan—and you ain't Tink Doss."

"You can see," Lazy muttered, "I thought—"

"That I was blind—I am, almost. Can see about a hundred feet—then it gets hazy—sure thank you. Tink?"

"Drilled. Think you could make it to town?"

Eldridge shook his head weakly. "Might have a chance if—doc would come out here—ride would sober him up enough—to dig the slug out."

"I'll put you over here under the pines and bring him," Lazy told him. He laid a blanket out on the ground, rolled the wounded man on it, and then gently

dragged him over to the side of the trail in the shade of the tall pines. He dressed the wound as best he could, working quickly.

"Dunno—why Tink would try to kill—me—what's been—"

"There was some trouble," Lazy told him, "but it's all over now." And then, grimly, to himself: "Or will be, when I get back to Town!"

Eldridge lifted a hand slowly. "You sure Helen's all right?"

"Sure, sure," Lazy soothed.

Eldridge lay back, his eyes closed. "Rather die myself than have anything happen to Helen."

"Take it easy, old-timer," Lazy told him. "I'm going for the doc."

CHAPTER XXVII

Bull Is Downed

IN THE old bunkhouse, Bull had seen Lazy disappear around the corner of the barn. With feverish haste, his big, stubby fingers rammed fresh loads into his own Colt, at the same time, throwing his mighty head back and bellowing defiance. He got the Colt loaded, began to blast away once more at the Eagle Track men; being careful, however, to see that none of his slugs found their mark.

He let them come close, though, hoping to keep their attention centered on the bunkhouse while Lazy made his break for freedom. But when the Eagle Track rannies got too close, he slammed lead into the ground so close it jarred their feet; he jerked their hats off with a slug, and sent them scurrying for cover.

But by that time, he noticed with satisfaction, Lazy was already far away, just disappearing over a ground swell. A moment later his partner was out of sight.

The Eagle Track riders had sought cover, and were now pouring a slow, but confining fire into the old shack. Slugs ripped through the flimsy boards, sending a spray of splinters flying. Bull laid down on the floor, then remembered Red.

"You're right in the line o'fire," he grunted, leaning over the bunk and loosening the rider. "Be glad to have you join me on the floor—but no tricks!" He wagged a huge fist under Red's nose.

"You got my word on that," Red muttered gratefully, as he stretched full length on the floor. "Fact is, I'm just beginning to

wonder if me and the rest of the boys ain't been fools. I didn't savvy all that talk you and Ladigan chinned just before he left, but I got a little of it. Seems like the Eagle Track owes you and that partner of yours. I promise to listen right careful if you tell the rest."

"Ain't much to tell," Bull grunted gruffly. "'Course you understand me'n Lazy are doing this for that five thousand. Hell! We wouldn't turn a hand to help nobody if they wasn't money in it."

Red grinned, but sobered quickly at Bull's scowl. "Oh, sure, sure—I know," the big redhead said hastily. "I could tell you two was just—uh—money grabbers, the minute I seen you. How about the rest of the tale, though?"

Bull was moving from one opening to another around the cabin, sending a shot here, and another there, keeping the Eagle Track men at a distance.

"Well, it's like this—hey, where'd that fellow come from?" The man Lazy had slugged had staggered into sight around the corner of the barn. He ran to a wagon which hid a man. In a moment the men were yelling back and forth to each other, and the shooting stopped suddenly. A man broke from cover and raced to the house.

"They just found out Ladigan's missing," Bull growled. The man returned from the house on a dead run, yelling to the rest of the men. And then Tabor yelled from the house.

"After Ladigan, every one of you!" the foreman shrieked. "He'll be heading for the Notch! Overtake him—and shoot to kill!"

One or two men raced for the corral—out of Bull's line of fire. Others hesitated.

"Do as I say, you fools!" Tabor screamed. "I'll keep Jackson holed up! Five hundred dollars to the man that kills Ladigan!"

"The dirty son!" Bull growled, and thumbed a shot at Tabor. But only a small portion of the foreman showed through the crack in the door, and the distance was too great for pistol fire.

He whirled to Red. "You wanted the rest of the story. Here it is—Tink Doss is going to shoot Eldridge—and claim Eldridge tried to resist arrest. Lazy went to stop Doss!"

Red got to his feet. "I'll go tell the boys—to watch for Tink Doss—and help Ladigan!"

"Hurry, there goes one man now—already saddled and riding!"

Red jerked the door open, pounded outside. He lifted his good arm to wave to the rider, opened his mouth to yell.

C-crack!

GRANT TABOR had fired from the house. Bull heard the bullet smack into Red, saw the big puncher jerk, his yell of warning dying in his throat.

"Dirty scum!" Bull ground out. "No way on earth he could've mistook Red for me!"

The big redhead was sagging against the bunkhouse wall, twisted in pain and bullet shock, but still feebly trying to attract the attention of the departing Eagle Track men.

C-crack! Red jerked again.

Then suddenly Bull knew. Tabor was in cahoots with Magurn. Tabor had been the mysterious "he" that Lazy had followed. Bull remembered Tabor yelling to the men to head Lazy off at The Notch. Only the mysterious "he" would know Whitey's mission to Town.

Bull hurled the door open, stepped outside, his Colt blasting. Tabor hurriedly jerked his shoulder—the only part of him showing—out of sight. Bull slipped an arm around Red and dragged him inside.

The man was breathing heavily. Bull laid him gently on the floor, ripped his own shirt to pieces for a bandage, then bared the wounds.

"Well, I'll be—" he muttered. "I thought that rifle sounded mighty high-pitched. Little round, neat holes—just like the kind that was in Hawkins! Yeah, yeah, I see the whole idea now. Tabor bought the gun in Eldridge's name—kept it here so that when a search was made it would be found—"

Red opened his eyes and groaned. "That settles it," he winced. "Gimme my gun—I'm gonna kill Grant Tabor!"

"Whoa, whoa son!" Bull chuckled. "Lay back and take 'er easy!"

"Easy, hell!" Red gritted. "I ain't hit bad—Tabor can't shoot—couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if his feet was against it!"

"Yeah, he must be a bum shot," Bull agreed. "Two chances to drill you center, and he bungles the job. But the little chore of planting a slug in that hombre's skull is gonna be mine!" Quickly he told Red of Tabor's treachery.

"Gimme the gun," Red insisted stubbornly, "and I'll go after Grant—you try to overtake the boys and explain things—it'll save Ladigan."

Bull chuckled, got to his feet. "Long ago I quit worrying about that lazy son-of-a-gun," he mumbled, shoving fresh shells into the Colt. "After all, there's only about six Eagle Track men after him. For Ladigan, them ain't bad odds."

"Watch out, Bull!"

Bull had heard it, too—a slight scratching at the back of the bunkhouse. He wheeled, flame spitting from his gun.

But the gun—poked through the opening where the board had been ripped off—was an infinite fraction quicker. Bull grabbed his middle, coughed, grabbed a chair to steady himself, then slid full length on the floor. Boots crunched around the bunkhouse.

Quirt Magurn stepped into the sagging, bullet-riddled door, blowing smoke from his gunbarrel. Behind him crowded Whitey and Slag.

"Damn your dirty hide, Magurn—" Red made a desperate effort to reach Bull's fallen gun. Quirt stepped quickly inside, aimed a vicious kick at Red's face. The redhead moaned and sank down.

"Where's Ladigan?"

"Dunno," Whitey answered. "He was here when I left, him and Jackson tied up. Here comes Grant."

Quirt spit blistering profanity at Tabor as the foreman stepped inside. "Where's Ladigan? Thought you had him and this partner of his hogtied proper. How'd Jackson get that gun? What's been going on? Where's Ladigan?"

"He got away," Tabor mumbled, shrinking back from Quirt's blistering tirade.

Quirt cursed the foreman roundly. He lifted his quirt as if to slash Tabor across the face. The foreman jumped back, covering his face with his arms.

"Stop, Quirt, stop! The boys — I sent them after him. Ladigan will be well taken care of!"

"He'd better be!" Quirt warned darkly. "Whitey found Slag tied up—and Slag says Ladigan knows plenty—heard you and Tink talking the other night about killing Eldridge."

"Don't worry," Tabor assured him hastily. "Tink will finish Eldridge before Ladigan can stop him and the case will be closed. Even if the boys don't overtake him, Ladigan will be signing his own death warrant when he runs into Tink. Ladigan didn't have a gun. Don't worry, Ladigan will be taken care of."

"If I hadn't gotten here when I did," Quirt answered, "Jackson would have taken care of you. Where's that damned girl? If she's seen or heard any of this stuff, that's been going on—"

"She hasn't," Tabor put in quickly. "When the shooting started I put her down in the cellar, so she couldn't know what was happening. Told her it was for her own good—a stray bullet might get her. Set the cook to watching the cellar door so's she couldn't get out."

"Better think up a good tale to tell her," Quirt growled. "We don't want her getting suspicious."

"Aw, suppose she does," Tabor grunted contemptuously, "as soon as this business is cleared up, I'll marry her. The Eagle Track will be mine, then I wouldn't care what she found out!"

BULL was fighting his way back to consciousness. He came to, sprawled out on the floor, face down, so that his opened eye went unnoticed. Grant's last sentence seeped into his consciousness, but his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"We can't afford any mistakes at this stage of—" Quirt's remark was cut short by loud yells.

"Bloss! Bloss! Come quick!" A Chinaman tumbled into the bunkhouse, waving his arms and spouting pidgin English.

"Thought I told you to watch that cellar door!" Tabor growled.

"Girl got away! Bump me—look!" He put his head down, pointing to a large lump thereon.

"She's probably still in the house, and doesn't know a thing!" Tabor said hastily. "I'll find her."

"No need of that, Grant," Helen Eldridge's cool voice broke in from the doorway. "I'm not in the house—and I know plenty!"

She extended her open hand, palm upward. "I saw you shoot Red with a high-powered rifle, and I found this empty shell. You bought that rifle in dad's name—trying to pin Jonas Hawkins' murder on him—stand where you are, Quirt!" Her other hand snapped up, holding a Colt.

The scar on Magurn's face blazed crimson, then went white as he stopped in his tracks. He shot a venomous glance at Tabor, then turned his cold, beady eyes once more on the girl.

"Reckon you know it all," he sneered.

"I do," the girl said coldly. "You bought the rifle in dad's name—and killed Uncle Jonas with it. Jackson uncovered your planted evidence, and you were going to have dad arrested. But you were afraid that something might go wrong, so you thought of a better plan."

"You don't know what you're saying, Helen!" Grant argued.

"Don't I?" the girl snapped. "The better plan was to have dad killed by a crooked deputy, and spread the word that dad died resisting arrest—that would be proof of his guilt—but you overlooked one thing! You'll never prove dad killed Uncle Jonas—I have evidence that'll hang you and clear dad's name!"

"That'll be pretty hard to do," Quirt Magurn sneered. "Killed resisting arrest for the murder—that's plenty good for most folks."

"Not when they know," the girl said softly, "that my father is almost blind—his doctor will testify that dad can't see beyond a hundred feet!"

Except for Red's labored breathing, there was dead silence in the little bunkhouse.

"Watch Magurn's quirt—watch—"

Something hissed through the air, ended in a vicious crack. Helen Eldridge screamed in pain; her gun spat harmlessly into the ceiling. She moaned once; there was the thud of Quirt's fist against her chin, and then silence.

"What do we do now?" Grant Tabor asked piteously.

"What do you reckon, you fool!" Magurn hissed. "I know an outlaw hangout way back in the hills. With the start we'll have, they'll never catch us. We pick the best horses and lead some spares. Once in that owl-hot hangout, no posse on earth can drag us out!"

"What about Helen?"

Quirt laughed. "Bring her along—she'll be fun on the trail—and that gang in the hideout needs fresh women every now and then. She'll wish she'd never poked her nose into Quirt Magurn's business!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

"See You Later"

TIME, Lazy knew, was the thing that counted, so he decided to take Eldridge's horse, a black horse with long white stockings. He was about to ride off

when he thought of Tink's gunbelt. He debated a moment, then walked over to the deputy, slipped the loaded gunbelt from his middle and strapped it around his own.

He was weaker than he thought, and this fact was brought home to him forcibly when he tried to mount. He finally solved the problem by leading the black to a rock and slipping on that way.

The jolting motion of the horse sent fresh streaks of fire shooting through him, and his throat began to get dry and burn. He worked the saliva in his mouth around and around and tried swallowing that, but did little good. The only canteen of water he'd left by Eldridge's side where the old man could reach it.

The sun was reaching its noonday intensity, and Lazy imagined he could almost feel the sun rays drawing the moisture from his body. The motion of the horse was starting his wound to bleed more freely.

At the top of the mountain—the Notch—he looked longingly at the deep shade of some pines just off the trail.

"Mebbe a few minutes out of this sun would help," he muttered, "and I could tie up that bullet rip better." He was beginning to fear fever, brought on by the loss of blood and no water.

He turned the black off the trail and pushed deep under the pines till he was well within the cool shade. The move saved his life.

Hardly had he reached the deep shade when he heard the pounding of many horses, coming up the trail from the Valley. Lazy hastily caught the black, led it deeper into the woods and caught its nose. Crouching, he parted the brush and watched The Notch as the Eagle Track men, sent out by Tabor, pounded up the trail.

"Look at the way they hold their rifles," he grunted, "like they can't wait for a chance to use 'em—six of 'em! That's the whole bunch! That means—" he swallowed a lump in his throat—"they wouldn't ride off leaving Bull still alive—"

One of the Eagle Track men was complaining. "Grant ain't no shot at all," he was beefing, as the bunch halted to let their horses blow. "Even if Jackson tried to make a dash outta that bunkhouse, I doubt if Tabor could stop him with a shotgun—I think a couple of us ought to go back."

Lazy's heart pounded and thumped.

"What's the matter, Al?" another rider asked dryly. "You ain't boogery about bumping into this Ladigan hombre are you?"

The first man jerked around quickly. "What the hell you mean by that?"

The second speaker shrugged his shoulders. "Ladigan's supposed to be a tough customer—and Jackson is all penned up—"

"I'll knock your damn block off!" the first rider snarled, starting to dismount. "Save your fight for Ladigan!" the other retorted.

"You two cut it out!" a third man broke in. "Cripes! We got enough trouble 'bout you two staring more. Suppose Tabor is a bum shot—Jackson don't know it, does he? And he won't try to make a run for it. C'mon, let's ride!"

The band galloped on down the trail. Lazy pushed to his feet, grimly climbed into the saddle. He forgot about dressing his wound, forgot about his burning desire for water. He ripped a big hunk out of his shirt, balled it up in his fist and pressed against the hole in his side, as he slammed spurs into the black.

"C'mon, you white-stockinged heathen!" he yelled to his mount. "We're traveling. Bull's still alive and holding the fort!"

Recklessly he urged the black down the steep, winding trail, taking turns at break-neck speed, pounding into a full gallop at the slightest stretch of straight trail, leaning low to one side to help the black keep his footing on hairpin turns. The pain in his side was forgotten, his parched throat ceased to bother him.

The black covered the last few hundred yards of downhill trail at long, powerful leaps, and hit the floor of the Valley. Lazy rested easily in the saddle, hunched forward slightly, and following the rise and fall of the leather under him with the ease and grace that comes only to those born to the saddle.

Eldridge knew horses, and evidently he'd picked the cream of the remuda as his personal mount. Lazy thrilled to his fingertips to the feel of the black under him; the rolling motion as the animal bunched his mighty muscles, the exhilarating surge as the brute stretched in his reach for more speed. The floor of the valley flashed beneath him like a never ending carpet, whipping past as if on a whirling treadmill.

Trees popped up over the horizon, tiny and toy-like, grew with astounding rapidity until they loomed overhead like silent giants, then whipped past out of sight, as the black flashed by. The gallant animal was in full stride now, belly low to the ground, front hoofs reaching tremendous distances for more speed, back hoofs spurning up a shower of dirt and grass behind. Eyes wide, nostrils flared, the beast was giving everything it had, as if it, too, realized what hung in the balance; that lives depended on its gallant, heart-breaking quest for speed—*speed*.

The Cross Bar H, quiet and lifeless, had dropped behind. Any moment the Eagle Track would show, far in the distance, on the horizon. Lazy twisted his head to one side to stop the roaring of the wind, listening—listening for the distant voice of guns, and his face grew taugth and grim when no sound reached his ears. He hunched lower in the saddle, patted the strained, sweat-streaked neck of the black, whispering encouragement, pleading for speed.

The tip of the cottonwood tree down by the barn came into view. Lazy dropped the reins, held his compress over his wound with his elbow and carefully checked Tink's Colt. When he was satisfied that no dirt from its recent fall to the ground would hamper its mechanism, and that full six shells rested in its chambers, he slipped it back into his holster. The Eagle Track was close now, he could make out the buildings plainly—could see the horses in the big corral.

"Da-ad!"

The girl's cry reached Lazy's ears faintly, but he swore with mingled delight and relief at the sound of it, then blushed into the whipping wind, as he realized he'd been glad to hear her voice.

His mind jerked back to her father, scarcely breathing back on the trail with Tink's cowardly lead in him, and it was a comfort to know that the Eagle Track men had long since found their boss, and they'd break their necks to get the doctor to him.

He was almost within rifle range of the Eagle Track now, and he hunched low in his saddle, expecting any minute to be recognized, and to hear lead splash by.

But none came, and he was puzzled. Also it puzzled him that, though he'd dis-

tinctly heard the girl call, she did not appear on the porch, did not run to meet him, as a girl would do to her father who'd been away. The Eagle Track seemed deserted as the wavering black galloped up to the corral. The labored, sobbing breath of the weary black was the only sound. With his good arm the lanky one slid the saddle from the animal, jerked the bridle off, and slapped it toward the pasture.

HE SLID around the barn, Colt jutting forward, till he could see the bunkhouse. The front door sagged half open, the dirty little shack was bullet splintered and scarred. He stuck his hat out. Not a shot came from the house. He stepped boldly into view, then shuffling as fast as the pain in his side would permit, moved toward the shack.

"Bull!" the cry was from the lank one's heart. He knelt by his partner, gently rolled him over. His heart sank at the pain-taut paleness of his friend's face.

Bull's eyes opened, wandered aimlessly around for a moment, then focussed with painful slowness on Lazy.

"Back—already—or—are we both daid and in heaven?" The giant managed a grin.

"We're still alive, or we could feel the heat," Lazy said with gruff tenderness.

Bull tried to nod. "That's—right—they want harp players—up there—not harmonica—how about a drink?"

There was a water bucket on its stand in the corner, but bullets had long since drained it. Lazy hurried to the big bunkhouse, got the water bucket. It was hard to let Bull drink first, but not till the big man had slaked his thirst did Lazy let any water pass his own parched lips. The color was beginning to come back into Bull's cheeks and Lazy turned his attention to Red.

The redhead was muttering and tossing with fever, but he calmed down when Lazy forced some water down his throat, and bathed his brow.

"I'll get some bandages," he told Bull. "I'll have you two running a foot race to see which one gets to supper first!"

"Better—find the girl—in trouble," Bull said slowly.

"She can wait," Lazy said grimly, "first

I'm going to fix you two hombres—then you can tell me what happened."

"Can't wait," Bull's voice was more urgent. "Quirt Magurn and Grant Tabor!"

"What?" A cold icicle rammed at Lazy's heart. Grant Tabor! Of course. Now he remembered—that other rider. One was Tink Doss, the other Grant Tabor!

"Lean closer—Quirt and Tabor pulled out—left the Valley—knew the jig was up—Whitey and Slag—went—"

"But the girl yelled at me—thought I was her dad, as I rode up."

"Yeah, ain't been gone long—five minutes sooner—you'd got here before they—"

Lazy looked at his big partner, at the pain-drawn tightness of his face, the lax, weak way his huge hands lay on his chest.

"You need doctoring—bad! I'll fix you up first—"

"I'll get well from these wounds," Bull was trying to sound emphatic, "but Helen Eldridge won't get well from what Quirt's planning—"

"Which way, Bull?"

"Trail—back of the house—straight for the mountains—better hurry—they took spare horses—will travel fast—Quirt said—once they got a head start—"

Lazy was scooping up Red's fallen gun, shoving it in his belt.

"Shove—the water bucket close—before you go—" Bull sighed. "Take a rifle—if you can't stop 'em—you can save the girl—a lot of hell—with a long shot—"

"See you later," Lazy said quietly and stepped out.

CHAPTER XXIX

Lazy Ladigan, Skunk Killer

IT WAS slow work, roping a spirited horse, hampered by the wound in his side, but he took care to get a mount with plenty of bottom. Slowly, painfully, he managed to get the saddle on; cinched it tight.

As Bull had suggested, he stopped at the house, remembering there was a gun rack with two or three rifles in Eldridge's office. He strode through the living room, sucked in his breath sharply.

The chink cook, a dark stain on his back, lay face down in the kitchen doorway.

"No way I can help him," he muttered.

He found a Winchester and two boxes of shells. And as he turned to go, he saw a telescope and picked it up also. From the back porch, he studied a faint trail through the telescope.

Bull had been right. A small band of riders was moving toward the distant mountains. With the glass he could easily make out Helen, Tabor, Whitey, Slag and Quirt Magurn.

Then with the glass he followed the faint, little-used trail ahead of the band, saw where it began to crawl and twist its way into the mountains. It angled to the left for a short way up the mountain, then turned and went to the right, following that course till it reached the backbone of the mountain ridge.

A rider cutting straight across the Valley, and going straight up the mountain, might be able to reach the top before another rider, following the trail, could get there.

"And that's what's gonna sure mess Quirt Magurn up," Lazy said grimly. "He mistook me for Eldridge, just like the girl, and knowing Eldridge couldn't see—even with a glass—figured to stick to the trail and save his horses, rather than tackle the mountain straight up and wear 'em out."

He rode back to the corral, slid a bridle over another mount, and galloped away from the Eagle Track, heading straight for the mountains.

His whole side was beginning to get numb now, with occasional sharp pains and hot flashes shooting through it. The blood had congealed, however, and his shirt was stuck to it.

The pounding of the horse started a hammering pain again, and after a while he felt a warm stickiness spreading over his side. But this time he had water, and he drank freely from his two canteens.

Sticking to gullies, ditches and behind trees to keep out of sight of Quirt, he reached the base of the mountain in a short time. At the edge of the upward slant he paused, took a long look with the glass. But the band was out of sight now, on their way up the mountain.

"But at least," he murmured, "Quirt didn't leave nobody along the trail to pick me off—so I'm thinking he didn't see me." He started upward.

Before he'd traveled two hundred yards,

he was cursing his lack of foresight in not bringing more than one spare horse.

The rough, virgin mountainside was indescribably rough, and it was almost as wearing on the lead horse as it was on the other. Horse and rider had to fight their way through the thick, tangled underbrush, on their upward climb.

Thorny brush tore at them, seeking to drag them to a halt. Tree limbs hung low, and one unwary moment meant that one could drag him from the saddle.

And his side—it was on fire now. A million jumping, thumping, stinging pains were racing through his torso, twisting him over in agony. The rough, bucking jumps of his horse as it fought its way upward, seemed to tear and rip at his side, like some devilish hellion bent on torture.

A few minutes of that and they had to stop. Lazy gripped the saddle horn till the red haze cleared from his vision. Grimly, he noted that they had made good progress, and just as grimly noted that already his horse was showing signs of utter fatigue; was reluctant to move again.

"But we gained on 'em," he breathed. "We gained."

He used his spur brutally, and his weary horse gallantly answered the challenge.

"Just to that tall pine up ahead, boy!" Lazy begged. "Just there and I'll ask no more of you—you c'n do—"

But the horse couldn't. He faltered in his upward plunge, pawed the air wildly as he began to slip backwards; then squealed in mortal terror as he lost his footing and went crashing backwards.

Lazy was on guard for just something like that; even so, he barely escaped, kicking free of his stirrups just as the exhausted animal went over. The lead horse bucked and jumped in terror, and for a moment Lazy was in danger of losing him.

It took precious minutes to soothe him enough to slide on bareback, adjust his rifle under his arm, get a good grip on the mane, then use his spurs again.

Cut, scratched and bruised all over, they scrambled upward till horse and rider had to rest.

"We gained."

The pines were becoming more and more stunted and wind-twisted now, and he knew he was nearing the top. There were bare stretches of slippery, treacherous rock, then more brush. He was nearing the trail,

too, and from one spot, he could make it out, off to his left, only a few hundred yards distant. And during his next rest period, he heard voices.

"Don't sound like no bear to me." It was Slag's voice. "It crashes through the brush awhile, and then stops—a bear don't make all that racket."

"Push on up there!" Quirt broke in harshly. "We're close to the top—we'll take a looksee from there."

"I still say that hombre that rode up as we left looked like Ladigan," Whitey broke in. "He sure didn't look like Eldridge to me—I'll bet money it was Ladigan and that he's trailing us now!"

"I hope to hell it was Ladigan!" Quirt Magrun blazed. "And I hope to hell's fire he's trailing us—"

Lazy slipped off his horse, bent low and covered the last few yards to the top on foot. He slid behind a rock, eared back the hammer of his rifle.

"You get your wish, Quirt! It's Ladigan—Lazy Ladigan, the skunk killer! Come on, you polecats—I'm behind in my skunk killing, and honing bad to catch up!"

Even as he bellowed his challenge, Whitey, riding in the lead, broke into view. Lazy's head and shoulders were in sight. The pasty-faced killed snarled an oath, his Colt whipped free—its crack sounded thin and high-pitched in the rarified air.

"So long, Whitey!"

The Winchester spat. Whitey jerked taut in his stirrups. A dull, blank look spread over his face. He slid out of the saddle.

"I'm going down the mountain," he said, took two steps and died.

"You're next, Slag!"

But Slag, next in line, had already unlimbered his gun, and it was bucking and roaring. Lazy felt something whisper past his ear, felt something hot burn along his arm as he leveled the rifle. Slag yelled, tried to throw himself out of the saddle—and wasn't quite quick enough.

"Lazy!" The cry ripped from the girl's lips as she tried to jump her horse out of the trail.

"Like hell you do!" Grant Tabor yelled. He kneed his mount beside her, jerked her out of the saddle and holding her as a shield, backed away for cover.

"I'm killing you, Ladigan!" Magrun screamed, and his gun spoke from behind Tabor and the girl.

Lazy sprang to his feet. "Then come out in the open and get at it!" he roared. He moved to one side, striving to get a shot at Magrun; fearful lest he hit the girl.

Quirt was shooting again, screaming curses as his gun blasted. Something snatched at Lazy's pant leg, and he sought cover again behind his rock. Tabor, Quirt and the girl disappeared down the brush choked trail.

"You're not going to let me stop you, are you, Quirt?" Lazy jeered. "There'll be a posse along soon. If they catch you, you'll wear a rope burn on your neck when they plant you. You can't let me stand in your way—"

A gun cracked the still air. Bullets chipped the rock right at Lazy's face. He slammed two Winchester slugs at the flash of fire, yelled tauntingly as the brush rattled.

"That's right, hunt your holes, you snakes!" He raked the brush with red hot lead, jeered at Quirt's blistering profanity.

Quirt flashed into view, racing across the trail. Lazy burned the air beside him with lead, but Quirt reached the safety of a log. He dropped behind his shelter, Colt roaring at Lazy. The lanky one's slug chipped the bark from the log, driving Quirt out of sight.

The brush was rattling on the other side of the trail. Lazy tried to pierce its protecting screen for a glimpse of Tabor, but it was too thick. He listened carefully, marking the place from which the noise came. Carefully he placed two shots there. Tabor cursed, the brush rattled as he retreated. Lazy followed his retreat with rifle bullets.

"You damn yellow-belly!" Magrun squawled. "What're you running for? We're losing time—and there'll be a posse along soon."

"Why should I take a slug in the guts just so's you can get a shot?" Tabor yelled back. "Why don't you rush him?"

"Yeah, Quirt," Lazy drawled. "Why don't you rush me? I'd enjoy it."

"All right, Ladigan, I will!" Magrun laughed, crazy-like. "I'll rush you! Tabor, bring that girl over here! Just you wait, Ladigan, I'll rush you, all right."

"I ain't showing myself," Tabor yelled. "You fool!" Magrun screamed. "Hold the girl up in front of you!"

In grim silence, Lazy held his fire and

watched as Grant Tabor, holding the struggling girl before him, made his way across the trail and dropped behind the log with Quirt. His lips tightened as the girl moaned and tried to cry out.

"What devilish trick are you up to now?" Lazy yelled.

"This, Ladigan!" Quirt bawled triumphantly. He shoved the girl to her feet, then stood up behind her. His high-pitched laugh floated through the pines. "Yeah, I'm rushing you, Ladigan, just like you asked!"

He pushed the girl forward and the two of them started up the slope. Lazy cursed grimly. Quirt had tied the girl in front of him and was forcing her ahead. Both his hands were free. One held a Colt, and the other toyed with his quirt.

Lazy was trapped. Should he try to leave his cover, he'd draw fire from Tabor and Quirt. If he stayed behind his rock, Quirt could advance right up to him without Lazy being able to fire a shot.

"I'm coming, Ladigan!" Quirt howled. "I'm coming just like you wanted. Why don't you shoot?" He cackled an insane laugh, thumbing a shot that sprayed the rock dust into Lazy's eyes.

"I'm going to whip you before I kill you, Ladigan! Like this!" His long quirt snaked out toward Lazy, cracked like a gunshot in the air. Lazy jerked up, desperate for a shot. Tabor screamed a warning and began firing. Quirt howled in glee as his Colt spat. Lazy dropped for cover.

"It'll reach now!" Quirt yelled. Crouched behind his rock, Lazy saw the tip of the quirt snake overhead. It cracked. Quirt was moving sideways now, to bring his quirt into play.

Lazy grabbed his rifle by the muzzle. Springing to his feet, he drew the rifle back and threw it like a boomerang, low on the ground. Quirt yelled and tried to jump sideways, but the girl impeded him. The gun, spinning like a pinwheel, struck the pair right at the ankles and knocked their feet from under them. They went down in a tangled heap, Quirt's gun booming harmlessly into the air.

"Kill him, Tabor!"

Grant jumped up, leveling his rifle. But Lazy was on his feet now, his twin Colts jumping and bucking against the palms of his hands. Tabor screamed as the lead sought and found his vitals. He threw the

rifle away, grabbed his stomach and tried to run down the trail. But his knees were buckling.

Lazy ran awkwardly to where Quirt and the girl were rolling in a tangled heap, trying to club the little killer. The ropes that held Quirt to the girl were his death trap. The scarfaced outlaw rolled and twisted desperately to free himself; jerked his gun around and fired. Lazy thumbing one careful shot.

Quirt stiffened; there was horror and fear in his eyes, he babbled incoherently; then went limp.

CHAPTER XXX

Something Terrible Happens

SWATHED in bandages, Lazy and Bull lay in side-by-side bunks in the Eagle Track bunkhouse. The big puncher, Red, was across the room, placidly smoking. It was midday, and the Eagle Track was quiet, with most of the men out on the range. Bull tossed restlessly.

"You say we been here four whole days?" he grunted.

"Yeah," Lazy answered. "You was out of your head three of 'em, and slept the other."

Bull muttered. "Time we was moving. This bunk's liable to grow to me."

"No hurry," Lazy drawled peacefully. He slipped a hand under his pillow; dragged out an object. Bull and Red watched him apprehensively as he beat the object against the palm of his hand.

"Now I know I got to get out of here?" Bull growled.

"You're lucky, you big stiff!" Red snorted. "You been unconscious the last four days. But me—" He sighed gustily.

"What tune would you like to hear, Mister Francis Periwinkle Jackson?" Lazy asked.

"That's more'n a man can stand!" Bull bawled. "Calling me insulting names and threatening me with that mouth horn. I'm gonna club you—" He was feeling around on the floor for his boot when the front door opened.

"You're awake," Helen Eldridge said to Bull. "It's about time—you've had us worried."

"Not half as worried as I am now!" Bull moaned, pointing an accusing finger at Lazy's harmonica.

The girl smiled and set down the tray of food she carried. She walked quickly over to Lazy, bent and kissed him. Bull popped straight up in bed like a jack-in-the-box.

"So that's why we ain't in no hurry to get going!" he roared. "I can't turn my back or go to sleep 'thout you getting into trouble. You get out of that bed and get your clothes on. We're leaving this place before something terrible happens!"

"And what would you call something terrible?" Helen asked smilingly.

"Why, the danged fool's liable to fall in love or get married or—"

"Would that be so terrible?"

Bull looked at Lazy, then at the girl, and swallowed hard. "No, ma'am," the giant said meekly. "I—I think it would be—nice." he forced the last word out. The girl smiled and turned back to Lazy.

"You see, it's this way," Red was explaining to Bull. "They found Hawkins' will. He left the Cross Bar H to Helen, but Quirt had near about stripped the place clean. But that five thousand dollars that Eldridge put up as a reward—and Eldridge is getting along fine—would just about stock it up. And that'd make you a one-third partner in the place."

Lazy raised up. "I been practicing the wedding march on my harmonica. Wanta hear it, Bull?"

Bull sighed and lay back. "I don't want to—but something tells me I'm gonna!"

THE END

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TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of The West

Clark Stocking — Shotgun Guard

By Brett Austin

THE YEAR was 1878. Gold had been discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Deadwood was booming. The gold diggings in Montana, in Idaho, and in California, had become exhausted and now miners and freighters trooped into the Black Hills, lured by the yellow metal that makes and breaks men. And, following these honest miners and freighters, came the road agents.

These road agents were determined to get rich quickly—or die! Some of them did die—killed under roaring lead from a shotgun guard's scatter-gun—but more often they high-jacked the gold from the Laramie stage, and made their getaway. Things got so bad that passengers were afraid to ride the stage and the gold mining companies were afraid to ship their gold from Deadwood to Laramie, the rail-head.

"We have to find a shotgun guard," the stage manager said.

"Yeah...." the agent said sarcastically. "But where? We've had a dozen this week—when a showdown come with the bandits, our guards turned tail an' ran. They talked a good fight, an' that was all."

The manager said, "We're gettin' a new guard next week. A real guard."

"Who's he?"

"Clark Stocking."

The agent's eyes widened. "Whew! That oughta stop them thievin' helions! 'Clark Stocking!'"

A few days later a wide-shouldered man of about forty came into the express office. "I'm Clark Stocking," he said.

"The man who shotgunned the Green River trail?" the manager asked.

"That's me," Clark Stocking said. "When does your stage make the next gold shipment?"

"Tomorrow mornin'. You need any help?"

"I reckon not."

"She's a mighty tough stretch of road between here an' Laramie. Hills and badlands an' rough country. Lance creek is the toughest section. That's where most of the holdups have occurred."

"I'll see you in the mornin'," said Clark Stocking.

Clark Stocking went down Deadwood's main street. Saloons were running full-blast, dust was flowing

across bars, in grocery stores, in hardwares. Suddenly a voice called his name across the street, and Clark Stocking turned. He looked at the approaching man.

"Hello, Boone May. Ain't seen you for almost a year. When'd you leave Alder Gulch over in Montana?"

Boone May grinned. "About a month ago." His voice lowered. "You ridin' shotgun on the Laramie stage?"

"Sure am."

"I'll be with you...in the morning," Boone May said.

Clark Stocking nodded. He and this man, Boone May had ridden shotgun together, they knew each other and the other's abilities. "Okay, Boone," said Clark Stocking.

"That Lance crick territory is a bad one," Boone May said.

NEXT MORNING the Laramie stage pulled out with a full load of passengers, the driver and a bullion box from the mines—and guarding that bullion was Boone May and Clark Stocking. Seated there on top the rocking, swaying stage, their shotguns ready, their belts weighted with loaded Colts and cartridges.

At Lance creek, they left the stage, got saddle-horses, and dropped behind, riding half-a-mile behind the stage. Now the stage road twisted into a brush-choked coulee, and there it was that a masked man stepped out, grabbing the lead-team's bridles, brought the coach to a lurching stop. The masked man's gun was level.

"This is a holdup," he said. "You passengers get outa there an' line up. First man makin' a move for his sixgun, gets plugged! Step lively now!"

Five more men, all masked and armed, came from the brush. The

passengers filed out, hands high, with white, frightened faces, and stood in a line.

"Throw down that bullion box," a bandit ordered.

But the robbery was not to be successful. For Boone and Clark Stocking, rounding the bend unnoticed, had seen the holdup. They spurred their broncs into the brush, tied them there, and went ahead on foot. When they were opposite the stage they halted about ten feet apart, with the brush still hiding them.

Clark Stocking's voice cut the silence. "Drive on, Gene," he ordered the driver. The bandits whirled, stared into the brush, wondering who was speaking. The driver, scared and trembling, just sat there, his hands held high.

"Drive on, yeller belly," Clark Stocking ordered. "You passengers, get in the stage. Make it pronto, too!"

The bandits, still not seeing the two guards, were in a quandary. Here they were, right out in the open, with two guns trained on them from the brush! If they ran, it meant they'd be shot before they reached the brush and safety. They had but one recourse: to hope Boone May and Clark Stocking would come out of the brush, and fight it out!

They let the passengers get back into the stage and then the driver lashed out with his whip, and the stage disappeared around a curve, its wheels throwing dust. Now Boone May and Clark Stocking came out of the brush.

The fight was short, brief, hectic. Guns recoiled and spoke, and powder-smoke hung heavily. When it was over three road-agents were dead and three were wounded. And Boone May and Clark Stocking escaped without an injury!

They made the wounded bandits tie the dead men over saddles, and they jogged into Laramie. There Clark Stocking roundly cursed the driver for being a coward, and then helped unload the gold. The manager at Laramie stared at Boone May and Clark Stocking with amazed eyes.

"The two of you got six of them!" he marveled. "That's fine shootin', man. How come you two can shoot so fast?"

"Shootin' fast is my business," Clark Stocking told him.

AND Clark Stocking was right. In 1852, on the trail to Red Bluff, California, Stocking, then a stripling of twenty, had been riding the stage, this time as a passenger. Two armed men—a gun-guard and a deputy-sheriff—rode the bullion box. The stage had been held up the week before. But now, with two guards, the gold was considered safe.

But, at the summit of a long, dragging grade, when the stage bronses had been slowed to a walk, a masked man rode out of the brush on a mule, his shotgun pointed at the guard and deputy.

"Up with them paws!" he snapped.

The driver hastily pulled in his ribbons, tied the lines short. Now five other men, masked too, came from the brush. The shotgun-guard, a fearless man, brought his shotgun into action.

"You'll have to fight for this dust!" he hollered.

The guard's lead tore into the belly of the man on the mule. That man screamed, and fell. Guns sprang into action. But two guns did not speak. They were those of the deputy and driver.

These two worthies, terrified and trembling, leaped from the box, and

ran pell-mell, diving into the brush—and safety. A bandit's bullet, ripping through the stage, killed an old woman, seated beside young Clark Stocking. The stage-horses, their lines securely anchored to the brake-handle, reared and pawed, but could not break loose.

The flight of the deputy and driver left the shot-gun guard alone. His gun barking flame and lead, he fought the bandits. He was a squat, fearless man who boasted he had never lost a gold shipment—and that he never would lose one! But the odds were against him!

Men hollered inside the coach, making a break for freedom. Clark Stocking waited until the passengers had fled the coach and found safety in the brush, and then he stepped outside, using the door opposite that next to the bandits.

His .45's out, Stocking went around the stage to the back, and stepped into the open. He hollered to the guard, "I'm a-sidin' you, feller!"

"Start shootin' then," the guard yelled back.

But his orders were not needed. For already Clark Stocking's guns were taking deadly toll. He killed one bandit instantly, knocking another kicking from a chest wound. The shotgun-guard, seeing he had help, fired more deadly, more accurately. And, when the smoke cleared away, most of the would-be holdup artists were dead, and the rest were badly wounded. Clark Stocking grinned up at the guard.

"You hurt, mister?"

"Bullet through the forearm. An' you?"

"Not a scratch."

The guard smiled back. Here was the sort of man he liked. He said, "An' what's your name, younker?"

"Clark Stocking."

The guard repeated it, holding it in his mind. Little did he know then he was repeating a name that would be mentioned whenever and wherever hearty fighting men gathered to talk of fearless fighters—little did he know then that this name would become famous in the wild, hell-roaring early West.

"You'll make a good shotgun man," the guard said. "Why not take up the trade, feller?"

"I might do that," Clark Stocking said.

TEN YEARS later, Clark Stocking rode shotgun on the Green River trail, there in old Wyoming. This was a tough, hard route. Several shotgun guards and drivers, to say nothing of innocent passengers, had met death here due to road agents' guns.

This day two men held up the stage.

The attack was unexpected, and sudden. The stage rounded a bend, and the two masked bandits stood blocking the trail. Even as the stage broncs reared to a halt, one bandit fired, hitting the driver in the shoulder.

Already Clark Stocking's shotgun boomed. The one bandit went down, stone-dead, and Stocking launched himself downward, landing on top of the dead man. He did not get to his feet. He just lay there, a dead man under him, shooting at the other bandit, whose guns were roaring lead and flame.

The stage horses, frightened and scared, reared, and the guard, unable to hold them, had to let them go, and the stage disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving Clark Stocking fighting it out with the lone bandit.

Two of the bandit's leads missed, and Stocking's shotgun recoiled. The

pellets caught the bandit squarely in the chest, turning him and dumping him dead on the trail, crumpled over his smoking sixgun.

Clark Stocking got to his feet. He stood there, looking at the dead man, then the thought came that he was miles from town, and that the stage was gone. But then he realized that the dead bandits must have had broncs tied in the brush. Getting these, he tied the two bandits to one saddle and rode into town, leading the horse toting the dead men.

Townsmen stared at him and his grisly burden. One man, a friend of his, said: "Tough fight, Clark?"

Stocking smiled. "Sorta," he admitted.

He rode on. The man turned to a neighbor. "There goes the bravest man under God's good sun," he said. "He doesn't know what fear is."

And that man was right. Quiet, unassuming, Clark Stocking made no boasts, had no use for those who bragged and boasted. His gun did his speaking, and it was always turned against lawbreakers. He was, in his quiet way, helping to build an empire. Those who came later—those who settled and tilled the land Clark Stocking helped tame—owed him much.

Clark Stocking helped build the West!

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TOP 'EM ALL

By Anthony Rud

**A Fictionized,
True Story of
the Notorious
Old Outlaw
Horse,
Steam-
boat**

Chot Merrill had to break a horse that must have been the Devil incarnate . . .

"Never a peeler as never was thrown; never a bronc as never was rode."



THE blizzard had begun. Huddled on his pony, with reefer high around his ears and Stetson brim pulled down in back to keep the stinging flakes from the back of his neck, overworked young Chot Merrill of the B Bar B rode slowly into the swirling haze of smokey snow.

He was bound toward Lonesome Butte, but hoped with all his heart not to have to ride that far, after a sleepless night.

It was the second winter of the worst weather stretch Montana ever knew. Which explains why ranchmen were callous toward their riders. When it came down to cases, and either a waddy or a hundred cows got through the winter alive, a rancher naturally favored his cows.

A pair of line riders from the Turkeytrack spread would meet young Chot somewhere—should have met him before now. This frozen creek bed to the southeast of the butte had been the junction point and rendezvous named.

Chot was tired, and more than a trifle grumpy and disillusioned. He was just nineteen, and save for a certain way with horses, and the ability to ride anything given him, could not even qualify as a tophand among the hard-bitten, experienced crew of the B Bar B. And this starvation winter, that meant Joe Stanley, manager of the Canadian-owned B Bar B, was going to let Chot Merrill go. Just enough punchers to fork out hay, and dig the cattle from drifts, would be kept on through the bitter months to come. And there were eight veterans who had been calf-snatching and horse-wrangling

when Chot Merrill was riding the slats of a crib.

"Darn 'em, ain't they got riders with guts enough to face a storm for six miles?" Chot growled into the frozen blond stubble on his chin.

He scanned the rolling waste, over which drifts now were fetlock deep for his horse. There was nothing but driving gray-white haze to see. Here and there were huddled herds, cows that would have to be dug out and fed hay, later on. No sign of riders from the Turkeytrack.

He knew the tough crew of the Turkeytrack. No sissies among them. That was what made the failure to meet him at their end of the line so inexplicable.

"Wonder if they could of got lost, facin' the storm?" Chot muttered to himself. "Mebbe I better circle, keepin' the butte in sight." He kneed the pony forward, crouching still further over so he could watch carefully for tracks. In spots the ground was still almost bare. In others the drifts were mounting in height. The bitter wind swirled and howled. When you faced it you had to pull a wool scarf up and over your nose and lips. Then icicles formed on your eyebrows. It was crowding zero now, with the snow so fine every slanting flake felt like a needle point.

The rider had made a half-circle about the small butte before he discovered any sign. Then he muttered an exclamation. Down here were tracks. Looked like two men on horses, all right; but where in thunder could they have gone?

Chot glanced back into the storm, slitting his eyes, but he could discern nothing. He turned the brone, and rode slowly straight for the butte.

AT THE foot of this small eminence the drifts were higher. With a frown Chot noted how the double trail here appeared to become quadruple.

"What'd they do, ride up an' back?" he queried blankly. The spot where he always had met the men from the Turkeytrack was a full mile from the butte. What in thunder could have possessed them not to go along to the meeting place?

Then his own drooping-headed bronc stumbled and shied, though without real spirit. Chot looked down at the largest drift he had seen. Something about the shape of it made him catch his breath, and pile down into the snow, kicking the drift and finding it solid under the few inches of covering snow.

It was a horse, lying there stiff and frozen! Chot kicked and brushed away snow until he saw the left hip, where there was a vented Rafter O, and beside it the Turkeytrack.

That left leg was bent queerly. Stiff as a board now, of course. But on a hunch Chot looked at the dead animal's head. Then he grunted. This claybank pony had been shot through the head, doubtless as a measure of mercy after it had broken its leg.

Where then was its rider, and the other man who had ridden to the butte with him?

Hauling his bronc along with him, kicking into every drift, Merrill found another that had solid foundation. Going right down on his knees, the boy clawed away the snow with his gauntlets. Yet, it was the figure of a man as he had guessed from the shape. Frozen stiff, of course. And by the old Harry, it was Keno Raht, foreman of the Turkeytrack — and one of the most-hated bullies in the Little Thunder range country!

Keno had been lying with his

bearded face tucked down into the curve of his arm. There was a stench of stale whiskey as Chot raised the body.

And then something happened which almost stopped the kid's heart with surprise and shock. The inert man muttered something aloud! He was still breathing, and warm! He was fully alive—merely dead drunk, and lying down there in the snow to freeze to death!

Conquering his cordial dislike of the range bully, Chot did his best to rouse consciousness. To no avail. The most he could get from Keno Raht was an untelligible mutter. The big man remained limp, as unresponsive as a 200-pound sack of oats.

Chot tried to hitch the heavy body to his back, with some motion of making his own pony carry double; but that did not work. First, the pony shied, distrustful, and then just to make it impossible, Keno roused enough to struggle a little and slide to the ground.

"Damn yuh!" gritted Chot. "If I leave yuh an' go for help, yuh'll be dead when I get back! Here, wake up!"

With all the strength of his tired right arm, the boy slapped Keno's cheeks. He had heard that this sometimes was effectual in awakening men who were partially frozen.

It worked—but in what was almost a disastrous fashion. With a bellowing curse Keno opened his reddened eyes, saw his would-be rescuer, pawed for a gun, and let go a thundering shot!

Fortunately, he was still too dazed by the liquor he had imbibed, to shoot straight. But the slug plucked at Chot's reefer sleeve in passing. The young man, already angry at this piggish foreman who could not even cooperate in the saving of his

own worthless life, let out a gritted exclamation, yanked his own gun, and brought down the muzzle in a swipe on Keno's head that effectually banished belligerent thoughts and consciousness for the time being.

Disarming Keno lest he awaken and have some more delusions, Chot then faced and conquered the monumental task of lifting the heavy, limp body and dumping it across the saddle. Using his rope then, he managed to lash Keno in place; but it was out of the question to ride the pony double.

Taking the trail to the Turkeytrack because this let him travel with the storm at his back, Chot Merrill trudged to northwestward, leading his burdened mount.

Three hours later, reeling with fatigue and numb with cold, he stumbled into the yard of the Turkeytrack spread. He managed to let out a yell for help; and a door opened. Two men looked out into the storm. Then they exclaimed, and came running to lift the body from the horse, tend the jaded animal, and then tell others to pick up Chot Merrill, who had clumped to the ground, and bear him into the ranch-house.

FROM that experience Chot lost two little toes, which had been frozen. Worse than that, however, he was taken with a fever from a bad case of bronchitis, and could not get up out of his bunk for eight days. Even then the doctor, fetched from Newsom, told him he would have to remain indoors until the cold weather lightened, or he got completely over the rasping cough which racked him.

"It's hard luck, kid," said Germany Klein, the broad-faced, bowlegged segundo of the outfit, "but I got bad news. Yore boss says you ain't work-

in' for the B Bar B no more. He sent yore wages. Here." And the blue-eyed, saddle-tanned waddy proffered a slim roll of bills.

"I wonder c'd I get on here? I'm pretty good breakin' hosses," said Chot wistfully. He knew he was not in condition to drift, as yet; and also he knew that just a couple of days earlier the Turkeytrack foreman had given walking papers to a pair of his punchers.

Germany Klein looked embarrassed. "I tell yuh, kid, it's hard," he whispered. "Keno's the big augur, an' he said yuh had to light a shuck soon's yuh c'd ride. I got yuh all I could. If yuh want to stay an' put on some weight, an' get rid of that cough, yuh can help Sammy Belden in the kitchen . . . a-course yuh won't draw no wages, but it was the best I c'd do . . ."

"Thanks, Germany," said Chot gratefully. "I ain't in position to do much choosin'—but I'd a darn sight ruther peel 'taters than ride south right now."

Thus the arrangement stood through January, February and March, despite a strange enmity on the part of Keno Raht. The foreman did everything in his power to make Chot Merrill uncomfortable, but the latter stayed out of his way. And the other men, headed by the segundo, Germany Klein, were outspoken in their remarks when Raht started razzing the kid. After all, it had been in saving Raht's life that Chot had got his disability.

"Well, when the chinook comes, yuh drift, see?" snarled Keno on one occasion when intervention of Germany and another puncher were all that saved the lad from rough handling by the foreman.

Through the winter Keno was supreme. The owner of the Turkey-

track lived in Calgary, and made most of his money speculating in wheat land. In summer, however, he usually came down to see to the roundups, cattle shipping, and general well-being of the Montana ranch. And this year the low beef prices, and the winter losses from blizzards, continued to make the cattle business anything but a sinecure.

One night a stiff quarrel arose in the bunkhouse, and Germany came into the shack off the cookhouse where Sammy and Chot slept.

"Want yuh to come out an' prove somep'n, Chot," said Germany. "We was ridin' Keno about his likkerin' up—the damn fool's doin' it again, an' I don't mind tellin' yuh that some day one of us waddies is goin' to let daylight through his onery hide a-plenty!"

"All right, fellas," he went on, as he hauled the reluctant youth through the bunkhouse doorway. "This jigger was there—an' not pie-eyed! I reckon he can say.

"Chot, was that a strawberry roan that you found shot, with the busted laig, out there to Lonesome Butte? Y'know, that day yuh brung in Keno . . ."

"Yuh know damn well it was a strawberry roan!" blustered the foreman. "Hell, it was my hoss. Don't yuh s'pose I know?"

"Hm," said Germany, "sounds funny to me. What about it, kid?"

"Well," said Chot Merrill, taking a deep breath, "it was a claybank, 'th a vented Rafter O an' a Turkeytrack brand aside it."

"Yo're a damn liar!" yelled Keno, leaping up and grabbing for his six-shooter. But a dozen hands restrained him.

"Sounds kinda funny to me," said Germany mildly, scratching his head. "I know yore pony come in still sad-

dled. Seems like yuh must've shot Bill Harper's pony by mistake . . . an' with Bill a-layin' out there, throwed, an' freezin' to death! By the Lord Harry, wasn't Bill Harper the jigger who smacked you down an' pinned yore ears back, spring roundup last year?"

"He caught me off balance an' lookin' away," alibied Keno surlily. "But about them hosses, I reckon I was too damn pie-eyed to know what was happenin'. Bill Harper was, too. The rotgut hits you plenty hard when it's that cold outdoors . . ."

WHICH was his sulky apology; but the glance he flung at the youth who had punctured his claims, was unadulterated, white-hot hate. Feeling puzzled, Chot retreated the moment attention was drawn elsewhere. He had come to think that possibly there might have been something peculiar about the death of the chap called Bill Harper out there at Lonesome Butte. They had not located his body until a mid-winter thaw disposed of the snow drifts, but by that time wolves had mangled the frozen corpse so badly that there was nothing anyone could do save bury it. The sheriff had not even been notified.

More weeks passed. Instead of letting up on Chot Merrill, the bully foreman kept on with small indignities which caused the boy, hitherto humble enough of spirit, to harden inside. This had become a personal matter. Chot, who never had exchanged shots with a man in his life, began to practice a quick draw and snapshot, in privacy. He no longer wished to leave the ranch as soon as he was able. No man could keep on treating him in this fashion without a showdown sometime. Chot meant to be ready—to kill or be killed.



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Beyond that growing feeling of defiant resentment, though, was a definite hunch that there had been something in the happening out there at Lonesome Butte which had made the foreman a bitter enemy. If that was true, Chot believed now he knew. The man Harper had been triumphant over Keno Raht on one former occasion. What could have been easier for Raht, with both men drinking on that lonely ride into the blizzard, then to dispose of his enemy?

A strong and growing feeling that he was in the right, steeled Chot Merrill's determination to stick with the Turkeytrack.

Spring thaws came falsely early that year to Little Thunder range. They would be followed by another blizzard and cold which would endure almost to the end of May. But that was a hardship which lay beyond the crisis of Chot Merrill's life, which came with the chinook and the melting of snows in March.

Keno Raht with a couple of waddies came out after supper to breathe the warming air. At the same moment Chot appeared from the kitchen with two buckets, going to draw water.

"All right, button!" snarled Keno offensively. "Reckon the climate is easy enough now so's yore tender throat can stand ridin'. We ain't got no more charity jobs."

"Oh, hell," said Germany Klein, disgustedly. "The kid shore earned his keep—not sayin' what he earned by luggin' yore carcass in outa the snow!"

"I'd of come in my own self, soon's I was ready!" flared Keno. "Ain't no storm ever got the best of me. But dammit, the Turkeytrack needs one more hand—jest one. Think yuh can qualify, button? I mean a flash rider.

(Continued From Page 101)



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Yuh said yuh was good with hosses."

Chot straightened. He knew the terrible grind of being a flash rider, but also knew the pay. On this range the custom was to pay \$5 for each head of wild stock gentled and ridden.

"I'll jest take yuh on that, Keno!" he whipped back. "An' by the Lord Harry, I'll earn more money doin' that than any other jigger on the spread—that is, if yuh pay reglar prices of five simoleons a head!"

"Oh, we pay that all right. Get goin' then," snarled Keno, unable to back down once he had made the offer which he had not imagined could be accepted. Why, the kid was still thin and white looking. A wild bronc would probably pile him in two jumps...

"One thing," he turned back to grit through set teeth. "We don't stand f'r no amachooors on this spread. Fust time yuh get piled, yuh take yore time!"

"I've yet to see the hoss that c'd pile me!" retorted Chot, though aware he never had deliberately chosen the worst outlaws—and by looks of the new remuda, the Turkeytrack had some bronses that would earn big money in the rodeos.

SO it was that the kid started right in that day, and did well. He knew the ordinary manner in which a flash rider works. That is to fork one or two wild ones in a day, then rest all of the next day—or even two days, if the going had been especially stiff. But Chot saw a chance to hold up his own with the men, and took no days off at all. The first afternoon he topped and rode two wicked hammerheads, turning them over to Keno in the presence of witnesses, tame and halter-broken.

The next day he finished with

three more. His bones ached, and from the sides of his jaws down through his neck, and out along the backs of his arms, the tendons and muscles felt as though he had been flogged with hot wires. He was able to grin, however, and hobble up to the supper table under his own power. He paid no attention at all when Keno Raht, sore as a bear with a bee-stung nose, tried to ride him. To have the kid \$25 in on the spread in less than two days' time, was almost too much for the foreman to stand. Yet the other men all knew perfectly well that when the kid was done with a horse, that animal was better broken than if one of them or the foreman himself had done the work. It was the simple truth that Chot Merrill had a streak of genius where horses were concerned.

Plans were made for an early roundup, though these would have to be altered because of the change in weather. According to custom, Keno Raht wrote a painful scrawl to the owner, Charles Pitman, at Calgary. In response, the owner came down—arriving just when the late blizzard struck, the the thermometer dropped from the forties and fifties where it had been, to ten above.

Pitman met Keno and Germany, the segundo, at the railway station, growled something to the effect that Keno must have gone daft to think he could hold roundup this early. Then Pitman turned right around and took the next train right back north. Naturally, the foreman's usually cantankerous temper was unimproved by this mistake.

While all hands turned back to the hated jobs of digging out cattle and hay-feeding them, Chot could have lazed away his time, since he was in full standing as a flash rider. Instead of that, he turned to and helped

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

Sammy Belden again. The old cook was grateful, since his job was really hard enough for two men.

It took Keno Raht nearly all of the time that intervened before the snows melted a second time, this time for good, to concoct his dirtiest play of all. He had not paid Chot Merrill any wages, and now refused to pay. His grounds for withholding the \$70 coming to the youth was that the ranch paid only for horses ready to ride; and that now, with this lay-off, the animals Chot had topped and gentle would have to be tamed again before they would be of any use to the men!

"I'm sticking—and putting it up to Pitman, when he comes!" Chot retorted grimly.

"An' I'm secondin' the kid!" growled Germany Klein. "Any time yuh feel called on to turn yore wolf loose, look my way, because I'll be shootin'!"

The big hand of the segundo hovered just above his gun butt. Even Keno Raht paled a little. Germany had the same kind of lightning cleverness in his big hands that another bowlegged German, named Honus Wagner, just then was exhibiting for a baseball club in far away Pittsburgh. And Germany was under the mistaken notion that Chot Merrill would not fight through gunsmoke for his self-respect.

The kid would set that idea right soon enough.

IN TIME the last blizzard melted under the hot rays of a late May sun. Then spring roundup had to be hurried. Chot had made a separate cavy of the fourteen bronses he already had topped. Now he raced through this string, riding seven on each of two days. It was arduous, bone-jolting work, though nowhere

as tough as trying to ride seven new wild ones in a day. These horses buckjumped and sunfished for a few minutes, then surrendered, recognizing their master's touch on the reins, and the galling bite of rowels raking them fore and aft as long as they struggled.

Keno Raht tried to object, saying that these were too hastily done. But Germany and the others snorted at him. Didn't they need the strings full up in a hurry now? And what waddy of the outfit felt unable to fork one of these which the kid had ridden twice?

That was unanswerable. Keno growled in his beard, and repeated his assertion that Chot Merrill must get the rest of the strings ready at once; but that the first time he was thrown he was through.

Such a rule was unheard of. Almost every bronc rider gets a little careless sometime, and gets piled. Chot simply resolved to do every bit of his job, do it fast — and simply never get careless while Keno was there to catch him up.

He had strengthened tremendously, being now some eight pounds heavier and immensely tougher than the day he had ridden to Lonesome Butte and rescued the man who was to become his tormentor. During periods which should have been wholly devoted to rest, too, he was practicing gun-slinging. He felt that except for Keno Raht he probably never would have a gun quarrel with anyone on the range. But this one loomed as inevitable, to him.

Through four following days, without taking a single twenty-four hour period for recuperation—despite the good-natured remonstrance of Germany Klein — Chot tackled and topped all the remaining horses for the strings.

(Continued On Page 106)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 105)

That night he just grinned tiredly and said he'd turn in; that he was too all in to eat.

He had no more than taken off his boots, with Germany and a waddy named Tex Allen standing there asking if he'd like a snack of grub brought to him—Sammy Belden had offered that unusual tribute to his ex-helper—when the door opened and Keno Raht was glowering at the trio.

"Too damn lazy to finish, eh?" snarled the foreman. "Well, by hell, we don't have no slackers on this outfit! There 're four more hosses down to the holding corral. Yuh ride 'em by dinner tomorrow noon, or git—an' whistle for yore damn pay!"

"Four more?" echoed Germany. "Hell, man, the strings are full up now! There ain't—"

"The's four more waitin'! I want 'em by noon tomorrow!" snarled Keno savagely, and left, slamming the bunkhouse door.

"Me'n Poco Little druv in three from the Bitter Creek breaks," said Tex Allen thoughtfully. "They're old sinners we missed last year, I reckon. But I didn't see any fourth one..."

"Well, lemme sleep, boys, an' thanks. I'll take 'em all on in the mornin'," said Chot sleepily. "Right now, I—" and a snore ended his sentence.

"Hm, tomorrow I think I'm goin' to have to shoot a coyote," said Germany Klein somberly, still staring with his blue eyes frosty cold, at the closed bunkhouse door.

Next dawn Chot Merrill and Sammy Belden, the cook, were the first two Turkeytrack hands astir; and as soon as the coffee boiled, Chot ate his breakfast soberly right there in the cookshack.

"Look out f'r Keno t'day, kid," said Sammy in a worried whisper. "That jigger's so damn pizen mean he'd

bite off his own ears ifn he tried to grin! Las' night he was sayin' what he aimed to do to yuh ifn yuh didn't clean up them four hosses by noon. Think yuh can do it, kid?"

"I'm tryin'," said Chot briefly, shoving back from the table, and rolling himself a quirly before tackling the bone-jolting, well nigh impossible task.

THREE minutes later he had his rope, kneading it through his hands to remove the stiffness, and walked to the holding corral. As Tex Allen had stated, there were just three matted, burr-stuck and unkempt ponies there. All were wary and wicked of eye, old sinners who had managed to evade the cavy drives of other years, by holing up in the rough country around Bitter Creek.

The Turkeytrack punchers now were coming to breakfast. Every man of them hurried through the meal, and then sauntered out to perch on the rails of the corral. Roundup would not start until afternoon. Meanwhile, the spectacle of a rider of the kid's known caliber, trying to top three or four wild ones in a single morning, certainly would be worth watching.

It was all of that. Through hours seemingly endless, as the sun came above the horizon, and mounted half way to the zenith, Chot fought the loco-eyed bronses that were driven singly into the chute for him to mount. A rousing cheer from the sidelines greeted his first two eventual successes.

He took a twenty-minute rest this time, but needed much more. However, in spite of the fact that there were just three bronses in sight, Chot had the uneasy hunch that Keno Raht—not among those perched on

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(Continued From Page 107)

the top rail of the corral—had something up his sleeve.

"I'll save a li'l time for that, whatever," Chot reflected, though now he realized that time was not the most important factor. His own body almost refused him, when he tottered up to make his third ride of the morning.

At this point, as the kid was just yelling for them to open the gate and let the bronc loose into the corral, a buckboard drove up to the ranch-house, and a man with a suitcase in hand alighted. The buckboard turned and drove away. The man, Charles Pitman, looked out at the men atop the corral rail, and frowned slightly. But he walked into the house, and thus barely missed seeing his foreman, Keno Raht. The foreman came from the big red barn, where a couple of box stalls sometimes accommodated Pitman's private saddlers. One of the stalls had been a sort of prison of late, however.

Keno led a big boned shambling gray horse almost seventeen hands high. The horse wore a blindfold, and came tractably enough. This young devil incarnate, not yet fully filled out with muscle and strength though nearing maturity, already had thrown and killed one rider, thrown and trampled another, and had bitten or kicked everyone who came within reach of hoofs or jaws.

The punchers had named this outlaw Steamboat, because of the manner in which he whistled through his nostrils when bucking or otherwise fighting a rider. From colthood to the very end of what was to be a notorious career, he had probably the most completely dishonorable intentions toward the human race of any horse ever bred in the West.

Unaware of this superlative treat still in store, Chot Merrill summoned bulldog courage, and fought a side-

winding, sunfishing brute of a chestnut, a horse with an iron jaw no mere snaffle bit could curb, and raked the enraged brute till it straightened out in a mad, bucking run three times around the corral, crashing fences on the turns, and ending by throwing itself sidewise with a squealing squall that meant attempted murder.

But the kid, riding bareback as was the custom with almost all flash riders, was on his feet, then vaulting back astride as the horse rolled over and scrambled erect.

Finding the load still on his back, and the cruel spurs still ripping into his flanks with a defiance of his worst efforts, this horse sulked and surrendered. Dizzy, the kid slid off as three men came running. Germany put an arm around his shoulders and led him to the bars, where a pail of water and a dipper helped sluice his constricted throat. The waddies' cheers were just subsiding when the savage voice of Keno broke through.

"Yuh got jest one hour—an' one more hoss if yuh're man enough," he snarled. "Here he is. Hurry up. Put him in the chute—"

ALL eyes turned toward him. Then the punchers gasped.

"Steamboat!" they whispered incredulously. "Gawsh a'mighty, yuh ain't askin' the kid to ride him!"

"He'll ride him right now or hit the grit!" grated the foreman.

"All right, I'll ride him—in ten minutes," said Chot from his position on the ground. "Somebody roll me a quirly, will yuh? An' since I've heard plenty about this hoss, I'll use my saddle. When I've showed yuh up this time, Keno Raht, I'm askin' f'r my time an' quittin'!"

"Atakid!" seconded Tex Allen. Other voices joined. It seemed as though there might be a general ex-

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 109)

odus of the riders, which on the first day of the scheduled roundup might be a major catastrophe for the ranch.

"Reckon yuh better have the money to pay off all hands," said Germany Klein. "The boys might get thinkin' about a cottonwood tree if yuh was slow to pay off!"

Keno Raht turned slowly purple, but for once he held his tongue. If the waddies really went through with their threat now, he was finished as foreman—lucky if he ever got a job on a Montana range again. But now all eyes turned to the inside of the corral, where a bruised, jolted, dog-tired youngster gamely stuck to a Miles City saddle cinched on the worst horse in the West.

Steamboat merely bucked and whirled end to end at first, trying to bite Chot's knee as he whirled. The youth rode relaxed. He made no grandstand plays like batting the gray's ears with his Stetson, or even spur-raking him. He pulled leather from the start. This was no rodeo ride, but a grim fight for life between horse and man—with the record all in favor of the horse.

Back at the poles Germany quietly edged to the side of Keno Raht.

"I don't savvy yore play none, Keno," said the segundo in a voice only the foreman could hear above the din of advice volleyed forth by the punchers. "But yuh know this hoss has kilt one man an' crippled another. Pitman said he wasn't to be rode."

"An' I said he was!" snarled Keno. "When Pitman ain't here, I'm boss!"

"Okay hombre," said Germany Klein. "If this kid gets kilt, yo're goin' along with him—though likely not in the same direction!"

Keno bit back his retort. The cold lightning from those blue eyes of the easy-going segundo, warned him that

a death quarrel was right there for the asking.

Steamboat never stopped. He arched like a hairpin, snapped down swaybelly, changed ends, reared, leapt from hind legs to fore legs, flinging rear legs high, then bucked straight to crash his side into the poles of the corral in a deliberate try at breaking the rider's leg. But Chot had looked for that.

Quietly up to the corral came a gray-eyed, stern-looking man in city clothes. Charles Pitman. He looked once at horse and rider, and his brows arched incredulously.

Blood was streaming from the nostrils of both man and horse. Then as Steamboat shook his head angrily from side to side, fighting the curb, Chot raked him once forward and back, with the rowels.

The big gray fairly exploded! With a screech of rage it took in a full complement of air, then shot straight upward, head going forward between his legs. . . .

Then the cinch snapped with the report of a pistol! Saddle, saddle blanket and rider went flying, thrown a full seven yards away to crash in the dust! And blinded for a moment, Steamboat reared and then came down squealing vengeful fury—upon the saddle. Chot was crawling slowly toward the corral fence, trying to keep hold of consciousness till he could get away from those man-killing hoofs.

But with wild yells, three punchers with ropes leapt down into the arena. The ropes snaked out. One forefooted the outlaw, while two more settled about Steamboat's neck. Then came dallies and snubbing, and the outlaw fell, kicking but helpless. In five more seconds Tex Allen was sitting on the gray's head, while an-

(Continued On Page 112)



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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 111)

other man hurried up with the blind-fold.

"On yore way! Yo're fired!" Keno was yelling, as Chot scrambled clear and rose to his feet. "Yuh was throwed, an'—"

"Throwed, hell!" snapped Chot. The cinch broke! I'm entitled to another try, and I'm game to do it!"

But Keno Raht was beyond all reason himself.

"I told yuh!" he snarled. "Now yuh'll go this way!" And with that he snapped down in a fast draw,

Dropping into a crouch, Chot slapped down his palms, drew fast, aimed and fired—just once. He knew his shot had hit Keno full in the chest.

Five minutes later Keno was dead. From the disappointed looks of the stern punchers who had waited, looking down at him—one man grimly fashioned a noose at the end of his rope—the foreman escaped easily at that.

"Young man," said a new voice, as Charles Pitman came to look down at Chot, "I haven't met you before, but I'm proud to shake your hand. You've saved me some trouble. Also, you made a game ride on the worst horse I ever saw. You stuck a good five minutes, and I call that a ride in any man's range!"

"Thanks," grinned Chot; "I'll ride him and tame him proper."

"You will not. That hoss goes to Calgary for the rodeo," said Pitman. "I don't want a thousand-dollar buckner spoilt, so you keep off him! These are orders, Merrill! And any more orders you'll take from Klein here, Klein's foreman. You can appoint your own segundo, Klein."

"Thanks, boss," smiled Germany. "If the kid'll stay, I want him. He's a tophand if there ever was one!"



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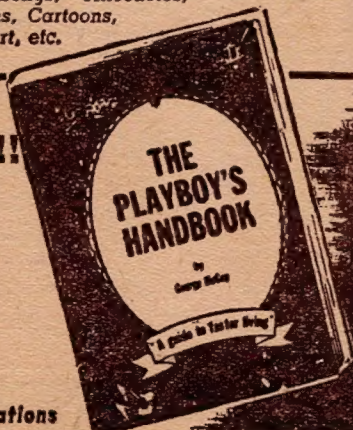
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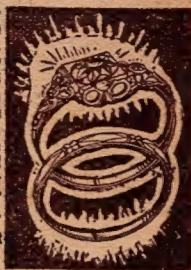
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